

THE WAY OF A HEART

by

Rebecca Marsh

Author of "Twilight Star,"

Bruised hearts may not heal as quickly as bruised bodies, but in the course of time they too recover. Wanda Ericson was still not convinced that she and Michael Peattie could not have found happiness together. But in the two years since Mike, a struggling author, had told her that love was less important than being able to pay one's bills, Wanda had become a successful dress model, thanks to her poise and attractiveness, and was reasonably content.

Then her job took her to Palm Springs, where she and Mike had fallen in love and where Mike was once more visiting, with the wealthy girl he had since married. Fearful that Mike's presence would mean fresh suffering, Wanda threatened to quit her job; in desperation, her employer called on Johnny Graves to save the situation.

A richly human romance of a girl, who, having once lost her heart, tried to lock it up forever.

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By the same Author

TWILIGHT STAR

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For

Pauline and William Motkin
kind people who helped me
to rent my first typewriter

FOREWORD

The main business of Palm Springs in California is the winter vacation business, and because time is limited and income property is expensive, the competition is brisk. For these reasons I have refrained from using as a background any of the actual business and residential properties that exist within the confines of the township. Obviously it would be unfair to owners of costly property to sing the praises of a few places and to ignore the merits of others. It would also be unfair to readers who may one day visit Palm Springs to suggest herein that the tastes of the writer, as reflected by the characters, are in all cases reliable guides.

Inasmuch as fictitious places must have streets to stand upon, I have also put my own names to the thoroughfares traveled by the characters. My reason for this is that the streets of Palm Springs are relatively few and that in certain cases they are closely associated with the famous hotels and shops I did not wish to mention. But, of course, the topographical features mentioned herein do exist and are given their proper names. Enthusiasm for them impels me to add that such sights as Mt. San Jacinto and the various Canyons should be seen by everyone.

As for the rest, I hurriedly retreat to that refuge of all writers who hope to give pleasure, not offense to

their friends who live in such resorts as Palm Springs: The names and places in this story are very definitely fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, and to real places, thriving or defunct, is purely coincidental.

San Mateo, California

CHAPTER ONE

Abraham Waldman frowned. "It's none of our business," he said firmly to his wife, "it's none of our business at all." But as he slid under the steering-wheel of his Cadillac sedan his conscience twinged and his hand fell away from the ignition. Suppose everything the careless woman owned was lying there in the unlocked Ford? Suppose a thief were to steal her belongings, and suppose the woman lacked the money with which to replace them? In Palm Springs a woman without a good wardrobe was nothing. And the woman might be a worker who would lose her job when she lost her wardrobe, and then what would she do? He shook his gray head worriedly. It was a bitter world when you had neither a job nor money nor clothes. Didn't he know? In his youth in New York City hadn't he and the wolf practically lived in the same room?

"It's a problem," he said to his wife, "it's a problem." He looked across the desert at the distant hills. "You see, this might be a lesson the woman needs. She wouldn't be careless with her money, so why is she careless with the things her money has bought?"

"Human beings, Abie, are like that." Then the sensi-

tive, amiable face of Reba Waldman underwent a change. Compassion ebbed from her dark eyes, and her lips formed an angry red line. "Is this my husband?" she demanded of the sky. "Abie, in my heart I'm ashamed of you. Now we're too rich to help people? Now we're too important to do good turns like the Boy Scouts? This Abie I don't know. This Abie fills my eyes with tears."

"But my legs, hang it—that trail is steep."

It was a protest he wished he hadn't made.

Reba Waldman considered his fleshy cheeks and the great bulge of his waistline against his sport shirt. With scorn she sniffed. "No more knishes, Abie, I'm sorry. It isn't the legs; it's the corporation." Again she sniffed, a thin, dark-haired woman who knew life and her husband remarkably well. "Home, Abie. Better you should still be a jeweler in Court Street, Brooklyn. In Court Street you could run across the street on a hot day to give a pail of water to a horse. You could give a job as apprentice watchmaker to a cripple boy who didn't know a pallet jewel from a ratchet spring. But now you're too fat and important to walk down a little hill? Better you shouldn't be a movie producer."

"Did I say that I *wouldn't* go down into the Canyon?" Brown eyes flashing, he opened the car and stepped down to the warm earth of the Cahuilla Indian Reservation. He glowered at the unlocked Ford standing parked near the rail of the earthen dam. "If I hadn't intended to do something about it, would I have mentioned the car at all?"

"Such a nice man," crooned Reba Waldman. "Abie,

you know why I married you after Mama and Papa said you were stupid? 'He's a good man, my Abie,' I told them. 'Stupid he may be, but he has the heart.' But you listen to me, Abie Waldman. If the woman is prettier than your Reba. I'm expecting you back in twenty minutes."

He rumbled bass laughter. As though she weren't the only woman in the world for him! Why, without her he'd still be a struggling jeweler in Court Street. Without her he'd still not know the rich, full measure of love! He leaned into the car and pinched her cheek and kissed the tip of her peeling, sunburned nose. "Better than beauty," he said firmly, "is a woman with a heart, and a talent for making good knishes."

Then, flushing with embarrassment, he picked his straw hat from the seat and clapped it to his head. In a clump of mesquite a bird sang, and up from the Canyon came the tinkle of water and the faint sighs of the wind through the towering Washingtonia palms. Emotion filled his heart and he breathed loudly with it. Reba, and the beauty of America, and a great motion-picture studio of his own—how lucky he had always been! "I have lived, Reba," he said huskily. "Do you know that? I have lived." Nodding, smiling, he strode across the escarpment to the head of the steep trail. "In half an hour I'll be back, and that's a promise."

Waving a pudgy hand, he plunged down the trail toward the adventure which Fate, as it happened, had arranged for him.

His legs surprised him agreeably. To his great astonishment and satisfaction, they didn't protest at all. It

was as though every joint and muscle and tendon had found a wellspring of strength in the fact that they were carrying him into the Canyon on a mission of kindness. With pleasing deftness his heels dug into the soft earth at the proper times, and with enchanting sureness the toes and balls of his feet found exactly the right places from which to launch three hundred pounds of humanity from one grade to the next. Nor were his knees remiss in the performance of their duties: like well-oiled springs they gave a trifle with each step downward, cushioning jolts row just as they had cushioned leaps from railroad freight cars in the days of his travels across the United States. He chortled, giving his corporation an affectionate pat. Noodle pudding and knisches might have made him fat, but he could still walk wherever he wanted to walk, by thunder! He looked up, full of pride, at his wife standing at the rail of the dam. "I could *hop* down," he roared as a boy might roar to his admiring best girl friend. "Look, Reba, I'm an athlete!"

"Canasta, Abie. We shouldn't be late for Canasta."

Canasta? When here for one's enjoyment was Beauty? He scowled. What difference would it make, really, if they were late, or if they didn't play at all? The game would be more business than pleasure anyway, you could count on that. Anthony Daniles would play indifferently, intent on selling himself to the studio. And the actor's agent—how *his* tongue would wag! Between them they would drive him half crazy and he wouldn't sleep a wink all night. And what would he be able to say to them that the studio's casting-director hadn't

already told them? Handsomeness just wasn't enough for the films, nor was acting ability. You needed camera personality, and if you lacked it as Anthony Daniles did, your other qualifications were meaningless. Now he would have to be cruel again, disappoint human beings like a Hitler. He shook his head dolefully, wishing Reba hadn't arranged for the game, but with her eyes on him he hurried to the floor of the Canyon.

"Lady," he called. "Lady, are you here?"

The stream tinkled and the boughs of cottonwoods knocked and creaked in the wind. He remembered that in the pioneer days of the West the cottonwoods had functioned as hangmen's trees, and with a little shudder he looked beyond them at the Washingtonia fan palms thrusting upward for seventy feet above the floor of Palm Canyon. A sense of awe gripped him, distracting him from his mission. Two hours ago he had scoffed at the story Reba had told him about the palms, but now, looking at their distant green tops and their immense naked trunks, he found it believable that here those trees had stood a thousand years ago, brooding over the sea which had covered this section of American. Nature made her best things slowly, didn't she, just as human artists did? And if it had taken Nature a century or so to create just ordinary trees, why, it might easily have taken Nature a full thousand years to have created such towering, magnificent palms! The thought arrested him in midstride. He felt, all of a sudden, dreadfully small and insignificant in the great scheme of things. He glanced about the twisted gash which water and erosion had cut deeply into the earth, and marveled. A thousand

years! Why, yonder trees had been brooding over this land a full century before England had been conquered for the last time in its history. And a full five hundred years before Columbus had sailed across the Sea of Darkness to discover the New World, the Indians of this region had cooled themselves in the shade of those trees and listened to the birds singing in their clusters of bright green fronds. And no one had made a motion picture about this ancient, storied place?

The thought appalled him. He wondered why he paid some of his writers as much as three thousand dollars a week. With fine material like this available for use, all they could think up was the old story of boy meets girl. True, surveys had proved that the steady motion-picture audience was youth with its romantic dreams, but was that justification for overlooking such meaty stories as the story of this Canyon? He sighed. "I'm an artist shackled by incompetents," he lamented. "I'm an American surrounded by rich writers who don't appreciate their country and the things that have made their country great." How could motion pictures hope to compete with television if they ignored the truly great stories to make and remake stories that catered to a special audience instead of to the general public? He shook his gray head and made a mental note to take up the matter with his story directors. A simple tale of the Indians who had lived here since prehistoric times would do very nicely as a weapon in the conflict with television. Such a picture would acquaint the great American public with a little-known section of their country, and it would open the minds of the American public to a

sense of the country's great, exciting past. And perhaps such a picture would attract fine reviews, and perhaps—

He looked up from the burbling stream, startled by a sound. Brow furrowing into deep lines, he glanced at the clump of hangmen's trees and undergrowth nestled about the great trunks of the towering palms. A sob? Tears and sobs in a beautiful place like this which Nature had created for human enjoyment? "Lady," he called, "lady, are you hurt?"

The sound came again, reminding him of the way his own Susan had sobbed as a child. Worry distressed him for a second time that afternoon. Didn't the woman know that when people sobbed that way they inhaled too much air and made themselves dreadfully ill? He crossed the stream and waddled toward the silvery cottonwoods and lace-like willows. Pushing through the undergrowth into the shadowed clearing, he stared at the golden-haired girl seated on the ground, and automatically his hand went to his handkerchief. "Lady," he protested, his story and Reba and Canasta forgotten, "you mustn't cry so. Tears are a confession of weakness, and who wants to seem weak?"

"You go away!"

He chuckled. An imperious queen, like his own Susan, but a helpless girl child just the same! He forgave her the carelessness which had put him to so much trouble. Taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he handed it to her, and like Papa Abraham to Susan in her teens, he commanded: "Blow." He sat down on a nearby log. How pretty the girl was even in tears, another beautiful Susan no less! He bit his lip and stirred

restlessly on the log. If only the Susans of the world could remain pink-cheeked and young forever and never leave their parents!

"Perhaps," he sighed, "it will go away. They say this place is beautiful, but to be frank I feel uncomfortable in it. There are so many Indians around. I remember the way the Indians of old butchered the white settlers, and the memory bothers me. I think all the Indians ought to be killed, don't you?"

There was a gasp. The golden head snapped back, and through shiny tears big brown eyes glared at him. "You horrid old man!"

As though evaporated by her anger and the desert heat, her tears disappeared. She sniffed and swallowed and blew her nose into his handkerchief. "If all the people in this world were as nice as the Cahuilla Indians on this reservation, then life would be a much pleasanter experience, so there."

He scratched an itch on his sunburned nose. "Now there I agree with you, young lady."

"But—"

"Blow."

As noisily as Susan had ever done, she blew her nose into the handkerchief again.

Scarcely twenty-one, he decided. Only the young cried with their whole hearts, and only the young were so obedient. He clasped his pudgy hands over his corporation. "I was using applied psychology," he explained. "It's a demonstrable fact that a horrid statement will startle people from anger or grief. Actually I am as much impressed by the Indians as you." He paused, watching

an insect crawl across his shoe, a stubby, shiny black thing that looked like a beetle. "Perhaps you had better sit here beside me. A nice skirt like that wasn't made for contact with the earth."

"It doesn't matter." But she joined him on the log, laughing uncertainly. "I seem to be doing all the silly things. People who cry over the ghosts of the past *are* silly, aren't they?"

"Still, tears are good for the eyes. Weeping does wash them out nicely, eh?"

"It washes them out." Her dimpled chin quivered. "But what does weeping wash from the heart?"

He smiled faintly, pleased by his own perspicacity. The moment he'd heard her sob he'd decided that her trouble was the old trouble of love cast down. "Perhaps nothing," he said, "perhaps nothing at all." Then, recalling his mission, he shook his head. "But leaving your things in an unlocked car doesn't help matters, either. With possessions, as with money and hearts, one should be careful. Suppose someone had come along the road and helped himself to your things?"

She spoke as to herself, hands working on her lap. "I shouldn't have come to Palm Springs. It was wrong for me to come back."

"Oh?" He thought of Reba on top of the dam, and of the Canasta game. And he had promised to return in half an hour, hadn't he? But another thought held him glued to the log. A little Susan in trouble, and wasn't he Papa Abraham, and wasn't it the duty of all fathers to help the Susans of the world? "Perhaps you had better tell me about it. Sometimes it helps to talk to a stranger.

And who knows, I may even be able to give you some good advice. My daughter Susan once told me my advice is always good."

"The usual silly story." She squared her shoulders in her polka-dot blouse, looking like a Viking's daughter with her golden hair and clear complexion and clean, young lines. "I fell in love here in Palm Springs. We rode across the brooding desert and we swam in the pools and we played golf and we danced. And often we came here. He had a way with the Indians, you see. You're supposed to be off the reservation at six o'clock, but we could come here even in the moonlight. It was nice. There were the Washingtonias stately in the moonlight, and there was the stream singing its eternal song to the eternal sky. We would sit here in this clearing for hours, and we would talk and spin our dreams. It was fun, and it was love, and we were happy."

"He married someone else?" It gave him pain. It was a good plot for a B picture, he thought, but not a good plot for life. He had a feeling suddenly that she had always made her father happy just as Susan had always made him happy, and anger stormed through him. "The scamp! You are better off without him. Such men should not be permitted to live. You see? You should not cry over him. Men who splinter dreams are not worth crying over."

She stared as a bird began to sing in a thicket. And now, for the first time, there was a bright smile, an easy, wholesome smile that went with brown eyes and golden hair. "What a strange man you are! Why, you try to console me as though I'm yours."



A self-conscious flush stained his cheeks. "Perhaps you are. I have a belief that all people are mine. If that sounds foolish, please forgive me. It is part of the approach I have to living, Miss—" He chuckled. "My name is Abraham Waldman. And yours?" **F**

"Wanda Ericson."

M- 366

A Viking's name, he thought. He repeated it aloud, finding music in it. "A nice name for a girl with golden hair." He chuckled again as a horn shattered the afternoon stillness. "My wife, I'm afraid, is becoming impatient." He rose. "You must come and meet my wife. Reba has common sense, and common sense always helps."

"But the grief always remains, doesn't it?"

"One can learn to live with grief." He wet his lips, wondering if she would understand. With their quick, nimble minds the young could always grasp the superficial, but very often they foundered in the depths of the less obvious. He shrugged. "I have a friend, Miss Ericson, who has, perhaps, the jolliest, best integrated personality I have ever encountered. He used to live in Vienna. He enjoyed life and people and people enjoyed him, and so he was very happy. Even so-called Aryans had great respect for him, it seemed, and even love. Then came the days of Hitler. And one afternoon my friend was returning home after a stroll. Unfortunately, he never reached his house. There on the street where he had lived his life were the children of the neighborhood. They were in ridiculous uniforms and they were singing a song the Nazis had taught them. They sang right at my friend, the man who used to dandle them

on his knees, the man who used to buy them candy and teach them games. They sang 'When Jewish blood flows from our knives, then we'll be happy.'"

"Good heavens!"

The voice of Abraham Waldman filled the clearing. "Just think of it! There was my friend, on his own street in his own city, being told that by children he *loved*. Then with their belts and their knives those same children attacked him, while a policeman whom my friend had befriended stood by and did nothing."

The Washingtonias sighed in the wind. Had they ever seen, wondered Abraham Waldman, such a display of bestial savagery? He wiped perspiration from his fleshy face.

"Now my friend is a blind man, Miss Ericson, and it is very difficult for him to earn a living even in this great country where people are judged for what they are, not by the color of their skins nor by the way they worship their God. And yet, although he walks in perpetual darkness, there is always a smile on my friend's face. For him there is the grief of lost sight as well as lost love, and the grief of a lost home and lost relatives and lost friends. Do you see? But he has life, this friend of mine, the great gift of God to man. And it is that gift, he says, that is important; not the griefs, much as they may sicken one. You see? Hearts do not actually break. And despite loss the world goes on and life goes on. The loss of a worthless man is what, as compared with the great gift of life? Like my friend, young lady, learn to live with your particular grief. And it will happen to you as it happened to him: you will find that

the effort was worth making."

He sighed as the horn of the Cadillac sounded again. "You sit here and think about that, Wanda Ericson. And then, one of these evenings, you come to see my wife at the hotel. We're staying at the Truellen. For beautiful women, you'll see, there are always worthwhile men. And my Reba knows them all. They call her Mama Reba. Just think of that! She was born on the East Side of New York, my Reba, and she still speaks English with a dreadful Yiddish accent, yet very distinguished people come to our place to eat knishes and call her Mama Reba and pour out their woes on her shoulders! Yes, you must come to our place and have a chat with her one evening. Is it a date?"

She sat motionless for perhaps fifteen seconds. Then Abraham Waldman received for his pains the finest reward of all: a quick, impulsive kiss on the cheek from lips as warm and soft as Susan's had ever been. Blushing, he turned abruptly and went back to the top of the dam which the tinkling stream had built down through the years. Sliding under the steering wheel of his Cadillac, he reached out for the key in the ignition, and this time turned it firmly. "It will be all right about the car, Reba. She is known to the Indians, and I dare say no one will steal her things."

"A poor girl, Abie?"

He met her dark, lustrous eyes and felt rich in a way that neither money nor power had ever enriched him. Thirty years, he thought, thirty beautiful, beautiful years. He swallowed a lump in his throat. "In the important things, Reba, I'm afraid she is."

"Then I'm helping her, Abie." She paused. Then her dark eyes danced. "Women who only kiss handsome men like my Abie on the cheek," she said firmly, "are ladies. Ah, such a lover my Abie is."

With her handkerchief he wiped the smear of lipstick from his cheek. Happily unaware that Fate had involved him in a trying adventure, he imprisoned the giggling Reba in his arms and gave her a kiss where all good kisses should go. on the lips. Then, basking in the warmth of her love and the desert sun, he drove back to Palm Springs.

CHAPTER TWO

Wanda Ericson returned to her car and locked it, her cheeks incandescent with shame. She felt that in addition to having inconvenienced the kind Mr. Waldman she had jeopardized, with her carelessness, the few things of genuine value that Aimee Reynaud had to her name. Her gloom deepened. What hope of happiness did she have when the ghost of the past could come between herself and the discharge of the duties she had to others? The loss of the clothes would have been a severe blow to Aimee Reynaud. With them would have disappeared not only weeks of grueling work, but perhaps also Aimee's dreams of a glorious future. Faced with the necessity of having to make a new beginning, Aimee would have turned on her bitterly, the last of her friends. Without Aimee? She shivered. Again tears welled to her big brown eyes and again her mind recited the jeremiad it had been reciting, off and on, ever since the Black Morning two years and three weeks ago. She wondered why she still lived. The best part of her had died when Michael Peattie had murdered her heart with his telegram, and she couldn't understand why the useless husk of herself remained. Mr. Waldman's jolly

blind friend, she decided, was a fool befooling himself. On certain terms life was acceptable, even pleasant. But when love was gone, when you no longer had a heart to speak of . . . she snorted impatiently. It had indeed been wrong for her to return to Palm Springs. The sooner she went back to New York the better it would be for everyone concerned.

She crossed the parking and went up the shallow steps of the neat white trading post on the right hand corner of the canyon. Swinging open the screen door, she stepped into the large room and gave a perfunctory glance at the show tables littered with souvenirs made by the Indians in their villages for the tourist trade. She had told Andy Beckett not to buy anything unless the article really appealed to his heart as well as his mind, but she wasn't surprised to see him standing in a shadowed corner of the large, pleasant room with all sorts of things heaped into a colorful pile before him. Indian dolls and Indian jewelry, pieces of petrified wood, birch-bark canoes and goodness knows what else! It brought a little smile to her wan face. How good life was for Andy Beckett! He was so easily pleased, so quickly delighted. He went through life as sure as Pangloss that this was "the best of all possible worlds," and he never for a moment doubted his own worth or the very real niche that existed for him in the great, profound scheme of things. She touched his arm affectionately. "Don't ever change, Andy. Just be yourself until the very end, won't you?"

"Shucks," he grinned, jingling a silver bracelet, "I couldn't be anything else." He turned, and with a re-

markably light step for a man so tall, so broad-shouldered, so big-boned, went to the other end of the room with the souvenirs he had picked out. Swinging the parcel on its string, he followed her back into the dry, golden air. He darted a glance down into the canyon and cleared his throat portentously. "A nice enough place, I reckon. But shucks, honey, did you have to weep over it? Your eyes remind me of the eyes of a steer I had to pull out of a bog hole once. Such tense and bloodshot eyes! And is anything any different from the way it was before you started to cry?"

"Things are different." She glanced off at the desert, looking at the swirling of the sand in a whirlwind. It was a phenomenon she had forgotten in New York, an interesting manifestation of Nature's forces working in their ceaseless ways their topographical changes to effect. She remembered that once out on the Painted Desert in north central Arizona, she had seen no less than seven whirlwinds at the same time, the sand rising in conical fashion to rotate dizzily some forty or fifty feet above the Triassic shales and sandstone from which it had been scooped. It had been during that trip, she remembered, which she had made to the Grand Canyon with her father and Michael, that she had become engaged to the English writer of adventure-detective novels. She laughed dully. "Things never remain the same," she said to the lanky Texan at her side, "didn't you know? There is proof of it, if proof is needed. Andy, do you know what makes a whirlwind?"

"Wind," he guffawed, his gray eyes dancing. "Wind that whirls and whirls."

"How amusing you're not!" But as his face fell she hurried on. "It's a question of heat as well as wind, Andy. My governess once explained the whole thing to me. It seems that for some reason or other one part of the ground becomes warmer than the parts surrounding it. The air that comes into contact with this warmer piece of ground, quite naturally, is made warmer than the surrounding atmosphere and becomes less dense, much lighter. So it rises as steam rises from the spout of a teapot, pushed upward by the cooler air that rushes in to fill the vacuum. It's the inequality in the force of these air currents that makes the whirling motion. And of course it's the suction that pulls the sand up, as that sand is going up now."

"Gee!" He wagged his head with mock wonder. "And you are beautiful, too. I'll tell you what. You forget your Michael and marry me, and I'll forget that you're too smart and that you cry too much for your own good."

"Andy!"

Her brown eyes flashed as they had flashed down in the canyon when she had called the kind Mr. Waldman a horrid old man. "This time you aren't being at all funny."

"Maybe not." He took the key from her hand and unlocked her Ford. He dropped his parcel onto the rear seat and helped her into the warm, stuffy interior. "But I'll tell you this. A fellow like myself doesn't blow hot and cold in his love. Nor does a fellow like myself care how much dinero you have or don't have. A girl could do worse than tie herself to a critter like me. A critter like me works for his wife and thanks God every

day of his life for the chance he has to make his wife happy."

"Two years and three weeks ago, Andy, you could talk of no one but that girl from Mississippi."

He sat down beside her and closed the door with a bang. "Because there was Michael Peattie," he said dolefully, "and because you threatened to slap my face if I forgot there was a Michael Peattie. But now that he's married Helene Stryton and now that you're back in Palm Springs again . . ."

"Not to stay." She remembered the decision she had made, the decision which had roused her long enough from her reverie to send her into the neat trading post after him. "It came to me in the canyon, Andy, that coming back to Palm Springs was silly. Memories. Call it foolish, call me a child of a woman, but wherever I look there are memories and ghosts. And I'll see him one of these days on the street, if I remain, and then what will happen? Andy, he's a married man now. And my governess trained me to respect morality. Andy, it would be wrong for me to chase after him. And yet if I were to see him do you know what I would do?"

"I think—" he began; then his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and adhered there, rendering him wordless. Inwardly he fumed. He began to doubt that she was really the daughter of Cranville Ericson. Tall, dignified, elegant Mr. Ericson had been a fool to begin the industrial war that had cost him his fortune, but at least he had been a real scrapper. He hadn't cut and run for it like a coyote the moment the going had become hard. He had stood his ground like a wounded

buffalo, giving the best he had in him until his adversaries had laid him low. An impressive figure he had been even in abysmal defeat. But this woman beside him, this quitter!

"I reckon," he said, finding his tongue, "that you ought to put a noose around your pretty little neck and hang yourself from one of the cottonwoods. If you're that sort of person you sure wouldn't be the sort of wife any man in his right senses would want. Me, I take the bad with the good. If I promise a friend I'll help her, then I help her. And I don't let ghosts confuse me all up inside until I run away from a place like a mangy coyote."

"It isn't that at all. I'm thinking of Helene Stryton, yes, and of my own good name and my father's good name."

"Sure, sure." He grew restless for movement across space, restless for the sights and sounds of Palm Springs. Ever since he had met her that morning he had been wallowing in depression. Now he was tired of depression and lies told to oneself and cowardice and the idea that because she had lost a rat all life had come to an end. "You want to drive back, or shall I?"

"Listen to me, Andy, there's more to it than you think."

Her stubbornness vexed him. "No," he said, and it was said in the voice of a man who had ridden the range and bellowed orders to cattle milling frenziedly in the lightning and thunder of a savage storm. "Life sure isn't all taking, Wanda Ericson. It's giving, too, giving until it hurts, giving the way you should be giving to Aimee

Reynaud. You said you promised to help her, didn't you? You said that you promised to exhibit her duds in all the swank places if she just designed and made them, didn't you? All right. She worked her mind and her fingers plumb to a frazzle. She borrowed money to pay your expenses out here. All because of your connections, all because of your promise to help her market her stuff. And now just because your silly little heart is all aflutter, just because you're scared, you want to cut and run for it. Jumping catfish in an arroyo, that makes you a right mean little quitter! And if you think I'm gonna set here and listen to your feeble little excuses, then you're plumb loco."

"Andy, *will* you be quiet?"

He grunted. "You've heard my last word, quitter. Shucks, I wouldn't marry a girl like you for nothin'."

"I wouldn't do a proper job if I kept thinking about him, would I?"

He didn't answer

"And there are other girls with good connections and no money here in Palm Springs. She'd have the help of someone who could really put her heart into her work."

"Do you drive me back to town, honey, or do I have to hoof it?"

Her temper erupted and she came to the brink of telling him that a long walk through the parched land would do him a great deal of good. Then the eruption subsided and she started the car. Turning it around on the parking, she drove it down the steep, winding hill through the arch of ancient rocks and stepped down hard on the accelerator the moment the tires bit into the

surface of the paved Palm Springs road. Now she ignored the beauty of the desert and the ubiquitous whirlwinds. Her eyes saw but didn't record the bare crumbling hills and the mesas streaming and shimmering in the heat. Her mind plucked one word from the dozens he had uttered and worried it as a dog worried a bone. A quitter! What did he imagine that she'd been doing these past two years and three weeks? Didn't his provincial mind comprehend that very often it required more courage not to fight than it took to surrender to your surging emotions? Did he imagine that life in New York had been simple for her after her father's crash and Michael's shameful behavior? Great heavens above, didn't the idiot understand that she *had* fought, that she had remained in New York despite every scream from her outraged heart? She glared at him as the buildings of Palm Springs came into view, colorful stucco buildings standing in streets lined with palms and twinkling with the cool green-blue of swimming pools. "You wish to be dropped off where. Mr. Beckett?"

"The hotel will do. It sure will be fun to mingle with decent folks again."

She ignored his caviling tongue. Halting the car before the imposing Hotel Golden Desert, she sat with her eyes on the road, waiting for him to leave. And she had called him a friend! She had once termed him the most understanding person she knew, except for her own father! Reaching across the seat as he got out, she pulled the door shut and started the car again. "Wait!" she heard him shout, but now her raging temper asserted itself.

"You may drop dead, Mr. Andy Beckett, and the sooner the better, too." Swinging the car out into the traffic, she turned left at Thrace Street and Acanthus and followed the bumpy road down a little hill to Quinby's Rest. Did he think that she wouldn't help Aimee if she could? Stepping into the cool shadowed lounge, she looked at elderly Miss Quinby, who was sitting before the radio, listening to the latest instalment of her favorite serial. "You will find," she said dolefully to her erstwhile governess, "that men very often aren't at all what they're cracked up to be."

The lips of Miss Quinby convolved, and from the depths of her larynx came a cluck. There were moments, she decided, and this was one of them, when friendship with the young, the callow, had definite drawbacks. But she rose nobly to the occasion and turned the radio off. "Such a profound observation, my dear. I see that you never did quite absorb all the instruction I gave you." Her cool blue eyes flashed. "A lady of quality," she intoned, "is careful at all times to express her thoughts gracefully and with some degree of originality. Also, a lady of quality never loses her temper, nor does she ever appear in public when she does not, to put it kindly, look her best."

"Quinby, it's such a beast of a world!"

Miss Quinby's expression softened momentarily. Down through the years she looked with her mind's eye, and saw a little girl with pigtails come running to her to exclaim: "Quinby, it's such a beast of a world!" How indignant that little girl had been, and all because the authorities of Garden City, New York, had very

firmly forbidden her to nurture a colony of bees on the Ericson estate. She shook her head. "It is no such thing. As a matter of fact, it is a rather nice old world, filled with very fine, very considerate people." She rose and walked with her dainty steps to the desk of the little hotel which she had bought with the help of the girl's father. She plucked a number of envelopes from the letter-rack and placed them on the green blotter. "For example, a great many persons have remembered you. Here is a letter from Mrs. Stoddard of Stoddard's Borax. And here are messages from the Misses Abercrombie, Endicott, Stilwell and Baker."

The girl stared while her heart began to sing. They had remembered her? They still wanted her in spite of the fact that her father had come a cropper?•

"Quinby," she said huskily. "Quinby."

"Nor is that all," said the elderly Miss Quinby. "You have received all sorts of telephone messages. It appears that your father wrote Mr. Borden of the Starry Sky Recreation Club. Mr. Borden telephoned to inform you that now as always the facilities of the club are open to you. He also suggested that the rotunda of the club might be an excellent place in which to exhibit the lovely things Miss Aimee Reynaud has designed and made."

A thought pinched the girl's heart. She recalled a statement she had made to Andy Beckett out on the dam overlooking the Canyon. She had been wrong when she had said that just anyone could help Aimee sell her designs and her clothes. Why, Mr. Borden had never in his life opened the club to such exhibitions. And people like Mrs. Stoddard and the others—why, they were the

solid core of Palm Springs' winter society. Sell them a thing or two and good business was assured and Aimee's reputation was made!

The crisp, astringent voice of Miss Quinby again pinged on the auditory nerves of her brain. "And of course there is the message which Mr. Peattie telephoned to you. Do you see? A beast of a world? No such thing. It is a good world and the people in it are good people. Now take all these notes and messages to your room and begin to think in more becoming terms."

Tingling with sudden emotion, the girl murmured: "Yes, Miss Quinby," and hurried up the broad staircase to the second story corridor. Opening the door of her large room, she walked quickly to the studio couch before the windows and sat down. She stared at the envelope of envelopes. A telephone message from Michael! So he hadn't quite forgotten her; in his heart she had continued to live!

Aimee Reynaud came down the hall and stepped into the cool room, closing the door behind her. But Aimee found herself being ignored while a trembling finger slid under the flap of an envelope and opened it. The designer chuckled. "Hey, isn't there anything for me?"

Starry eyes met hers. "Mr. Borden has invited us to show your things at the club, Aimee. Oh, and all sorts of people have been writing and telephoning. Aimee, with a little luck we're made."

The redhead clapped a melodramatic hand to her high, wide forehead. "I'm hearing things, of course. That's the only explanation. I've gone and lost my mind."

But again she found herself being ignored. Wanda's

trembling fingers drew the telephone message from the little envelope, and big brown eyes scanned the words quickly. There was a little moan, a little cry, and then Aimee saw a strange thing happen. She saw a golden head snap back, saw youth with its adolescent hopes and fears evolve into a stern-faced woman in less time than it took her to draw a breath. She moved across the room. "Wanda, don't look like that! Honey, what is it; what's wrong?"

The face grew composed again. There was even a cool little smile as the hurt heart of Wanda was withdrawn from view. The girl shrugged and said thoughtfully, "It's from Michael, Aimee. He would appreciate it if I would come to my senses and return to New York."

"He didn't!"

Wanda Ericson carefully folded the message and stuffed it back into the envelope. "Strange, isn't it? A girl wants to do the right thing. If she has a respect for the code, as I always have had, every molecule of her being is repelled just by the thought of coming between a man and his wife. And yet—"

"Slow up there, honey." Aimee sat down, beginning to think she had misunderstood the emotion she had seen leaping in the girl's big, dilated eyes. "Let's take a couple of deep breaths, huh?"

"He should be ashamed of himself, Michael. After all, he did marry her."

It was too much for Aimee Reynaud. She understood clothes and to a certain degree she understood business. But reasoning of this sort! "Look, that whole thing is

over, Wanda. It ended some two years ago. Maybe Helene did you dirt. She was supposed to be your best friend and friends don't usually muscle in on someone else's territory. But regardless of that—"

"Or perhaps he shouldn't be ashamed, Aimee? After all, if he still loves me, isn't it wrong for him to remain married to her?"

"Wanda Elaine Ericson!"

"And obviously he still loves me. If he didn't, you see, what difference would it make to him if I were to remain in Palm Springs? Aimee, the message is an admission, don't you see? Why, it's an admission of love, and of fear. He wants me to leave because he's afraid of what will happen if I remain. Great day in the morning, Aimee, maybe Helene won only a temporary victory."

"You're fired," whooped Aimee Reynaud. "I won't let you do such things to yourself."

"Rubbish." Wanda Ericson went to the door. Tall and straight and thoughtful, she stood there while the sunshine pouring through the window struck highlights from her hair. "He is mine," she said flatly. "He always was in the past, he always will be in the future. Nothing you nor I nor anyone on earth can do can alter that fact. When people love it is forever. The mind may thwart love for a little while, but in the end love always wins out. If that weren't true this would be a horrible world. It would be a world without hope, a world without genuine happiness. But since it is true, here I am and here I remain."

"I'm writing to your father. This instant!"

Wanda smiled indifferently. "Do whatever you think

best, Aimee. In the meantime, perhaps I'd better buckle down and do some useful work."

A soft glow on her young, wholesome face, she went down the broad staircase to get the things from the car.

CHAPTER THREE

The notes and telephone messages were promptly answered, and a few afternoons later the girl somehow found the time to sit down at her desk and write a long letter to her father. She made a conscious effort to be gay, remembering that to her father tone had always been as important as content. She was quite sure when she reread the letter that her old governess Miss Quinby would have found much wrong with it. Once again she had failed to express herself with grace and wit, and far too many sentences had ended with prepositions and dangling participles. But in it she had said what she had wanted to say, and after stuffing the sheets into the envelope, she went downstairs and dropped the letter into the lobby mail-box. That chore accomplished, she glanced at her watch, saw that there was time, and drove out to the Starry Sky Recreation Club for a chat with Mr. Borden, the manager. She found it strange that he should have offered a helping hand. In the past he had never impressed her favorably, striking her as being the sort of man who was too autocratic with the poor and too servile with the rich for his own good. A thought nagged at the back of her mind as she parked the car

before the sprawling main building. She wondered what profit he expected to derive from this gesture he was making. Did he hope that she would sing his praises to such important personages as Mrs. Stoddard and Miss Abercrombie? A giggle welled from her throat. Poor Mr. Borden with his longing for position. Didn't he understand yet that social position was one of the least important concerns a person could have? The fact of life was all that mattered. If you were a human being, then you had all the position you needed. As for the rest, so much of it was sham, so much of it was artificial and basically unsound, that only the naive ascribed to social position anything of particular importance. Looking at the green-tiled, chrome-trimmed façade of the long, low Spanish-style structure, she had a curious desire to tell Mr. Borden that the man who had created that building, the man who had plunked beauty down upon the shifting sands of the desert, the man who had created jobs for dozens and pleasure for hundreds, was infinitely more important in the social and economic structure of the country than the blue-blooded patrons he catered to in so many outlandish and undignified ways. The real strength and drive of any nation, she wanted to tell him, resided in people like himself, people who dreamed and people who worked hard to translate their dreams into useful reality, employers and workers who made their lives count for something, ladies and gentlemen who enriched the community in the natural course of attempting to improve their own lots.

But this desire was an easy one to inhibit. She had a notion that if she were to tell him such things he would

scream, at the top of his voice, that he wanted no Communistic chatter in his office. With his unbecoming adulation of people who had, and his contempt for people who owned little, any hint to the effect that some of his idols were a useless lot would be construed by him as being Communistic propaganda. The offer would be withdrawn. A fine opportunity for Aimee and herself would disappear. A road that had seemed easy to travel would suddenly reveal itself to be a very bumpy and difficult road indeed. I shall be regal even in my gratitude, she decided. The Ericsons may lack a few millions, but by golly, their blood is still as blue as the blue, blue sky.

Getting out of her car, she straightened her skirt about her hips, tucked the tails of her blouse back where they belonged, and went up the short flight of terrazzo steps to the twinkling glass doors. Drawing a deep breath, she stepped inside.

She discovered everything was still the same. The glittering, jewel-like aspects of the club's exterior had not as yet been repeated in the decor of the large, oblong lounge that ran the full width of the building from east to west. Indomitable as a lion, Mr. Borden had stood firm, it seemed, against the push of time and the onslaughts of young minds seeking change. It made her smile. For as long as she could remember Mr. Borden had been waging grim battle with the sons and daughters of his more staid clientele. To each and every demand that the club be made to "look like something," he had given the promise that *next* year the place would be modernized, that all would be made to "twinkle and

shine like ornaments on a Christmas tree." But apparently "next" year still hadn't arrived, and apparently it never would so long as Mr. Borden had a mind to fight with and the heart to stand his ground against all attackers. In dignity the lounge had been conceived, cloaked with dignity the lounge had materialized, and there with dignity the lounge still stood, a gray-walled room and a quiet room, a room hung with academic oil paintings, and furnished with mission-style furniture that stood just so on the dark wall-to-wall carpeting. The Greeks and Romans stood just so, too, on their pedestals, the busts of famous men of history looking with unseeing eyes at the comings and goings of mere mortals, and perhaps reminding them, with their ascetic marble faces, that eventually all must come to dust. One wondered, looking at their sensitive faces, what these famous men thought of the rococo leaping and plunging above the mirrors and candelabra in frisky abandon. Did they approve of such energy, of such incongruous frivolity? Or were they glancing with approval, rather, at the bald-headed gentleman sleeping lunch off in his leather chair over near one of the curtained windows? Wanda Ericson chuckled. The room brought back happy memories with its unchanged dignity; it linked the stern present with a more delightful past, and with the gleaming luster of polished wood and much-used leather upholstery; it made her feel at home suddenly in a way that she hadn't felt at home ever since a few mornings ago when she had looked up from the car on the road and seen the majesty of Mt. San Jacinto standing on the edge of the Coachella Valley. She sighed. With happy, buoy-

ant stride she walked across the room to her old chair before the great dark fireplace. Sitting down, crossing her legs and tucking her cotton skirt under her knees, she said softly: "Don't you ever tire of murder stories, Mrs. Stoddard? I should think books about the west would be of especial appeal to you."

The book was snapped shut. "Don't *ever* interrupt my reading," cried Mrs. Rhoda Stoddard. Then awareness came to her plump, bronzed face. "Well, for goodness sakes! Wanda, it's really you."

Rising from the chair, she went over to the pink-faced girl and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Then back to her own chair she returned, an amply built woman in colorful print silk, pearls lustrous at her throat, the eternal emeralds gleaming on her hands. "Now this is what we shall do," she said crisply. "In the first place I disapprove of this entire adventure. You were not born to sell clothes. Selling clothes is ridiculous work, work fit only for people who can do nothing else. In the second place, I would rescue t any work that robbed me of your company. So you shall become my companion, my social secretary and anything else hat I can think of. And of course you will move to my hotel at once. No refusal, if you please. I have already engaged a proper room for you. Wanda, the very idea! I have been offended. As a child you used to call me Aunt Rhoda. When you were a child my husband permitted you to make a mustang of him because he loved you. And did you solicit our help when all that dreadful change occurred in your life?" Mrs. Rhoda Stoddard sniffed, a gray-haired woman with sharp black eyes and a firm, dimpled chin. "No. I have

changed my mind. You have offended me and I don't want ever to see you again."

The laughter ebbed from the girl's big brown eyes. She plucked at the hem of her skirt. "I was sorry to hear about Uncle Marvin, Aunt Rhoda; he was such a wonderful man. The world can't afford to lose such fine men."

"Uncle Marvin," said Mrs. Stoddard crisply, "was a wretch. He cut business corners and very often he used the weight of his money to gain an unfair advantage over his competitors. But I loved him, and I did appreciate your very long and very sweet letter. You realize, of course, that if he had not been on his deathbed he would have helped you and your father? Marvin liked your father very much. He said your father was the only Easterner he ever liked, and he always used to talk about that fishing trip he and your father once made to Francois Lake up in British Columbia. He said that your father's long silences were usually more eloquent than the conversation of most people."

"Dad enjoyed him, too."

Mrs. Stoddard nodded, looking thoughtfully into the past. Through the sound-system came the airy strains of a waltz, and the music awakened the elderly gentleman who had been sleeping off his lunch in one of the chairs at the window. He stiffened and spluttered and rubbed his eyes. Then loudly he cleared his throat and, grunting, lighted a cigar. The sensitive faces of the Greeks and Romans seemed to become more austere in the blue smoke that went curling about their white marble heads. "An abominable habit," declared Mrs. Stoddard. She

looked down at her book and pursed her lips. "Marvin, incidentally, never did approve of your interest in this writer. And I must confess that now that I have read some of Michael Peattie's work, I'm inclined to agree with Marvin's opinion that young Mr. Peattie has little depth to him. Oh, I will grant that he has a certain glibness and a certain superficial sparkle. His books, such as they are, are perfectly all right. But as for having him for a husband . . ."

The girl flushed. She had spent many long hours thinking about Michael since the afternoon that Miss Quinby had given her his provocative message. She had remembered the pleasures of the relationship and the high promise of the future together that they had so often discussed in the moonlit loveliness of Palm Canyon. And there on her bed in her room, with the noise and traffic hum of distant Thrace Street coming through the windows, a certain understanding had come to her, a peculiar perception that had enabled her to see, for the first time, his side of the whole thing. It had been a rather startling experience to lie there in the dark and receive, as from on high, his gift of real discernment. It had excited her. All atremble, she had leaped from her bed and put on her negligee and gone running down the corridor to Aimee's room. Ignoring the little fact that she had interrupted Aimee at her work, she had dropped onto the woman's bed and had exulted: "Why should he have remained true to me, Aimee? I went away, didn't I? And it was months before I wrote him, wasn't it? What would you think if your beloved went racing away in a plane and ignored your existence for

several months? Would you come to the same conclusion that he apparently did? You bet you would. And doesn't human ego always seek a balm, a palliative to lessen the pain of the bruise? You bet it does. Great day in the morning, why didn't I understand all this sooner? Why didn't I perceive that the marriage to Helene was almost inevitable? Why, if the same thing had happened to me I would probably have married Andy Beckett at once, just as he married Helen Stryton."

"How interesting, honey, that we can always sell ourselves just about any bill of goods that we want to sell ourselves."

But this acid observation hadn't had the effect of lessening the girl's sense of excitement. Nor had it given Wanda Ericson further food for thought. Not the first girl in the world, nor yet the last, to beguile her mind with emotion's irrationalisms, she had returned in an elated state of mind to her room, and this feeling of elation was still tingling through her as she sat in the big chair before the fireplace, conversing with Rhoda Stoddard of Stoddard's Borax. "You must take the trouble," she said with condescension to the older woman, "to look deeper into the hearts and minds of people. What is that book but simply a commercial piece of work turned out for a special market? That market asks for gore, not heart; that market asks for action of the body, not real action of the mind. Naturally it is superficial and glib. In the world today it is glibness and action that boosts the sales of any book. As for the opinion of Uncle Marvin, *and* Dad, *and* Miss Quinby, *and* all the others—it's wrong. I'm sorry, but you're

dreadfully wrong, too. The only mistake I made was not marrying him before I went back to New York to try to help Dad salvage something from the wreck. If I had married him I'd be a happier person today."

"Rubbish." Rhoda Stoddard looked at her watch, a little trifle encrusted with glittering diamonds. She tucked the book under her arm and rose. "Tea. It seems that I promised Miss Abercrombie that I would have tea with her this afternoon. I shall expect you at the hotel this evening."

The girl chuckled. "Oh, but I already have a job. And don't be angry, Aunt Rhoda, please? It seems that I must prove to an idiot that I'm not a quitter. And it's fun, Aunt Rhoda, really it is. Why, it must be the same sort of fun that you and Uncle Marvin had when you turned some worthless lead mines into rich sources of borax. I couldn't possibly quit Aimee Reynaud now. Why, everything is working out beautifully. Aunt Rhoda, did you hear the news? Mr. Borden has actually invited us to display our clothes in the rotunda."

"My dear child, you were born to marry a gentleman of position and distinction. Work is not fun. Nor do I particularly want to be reminded of my more difficult days. Now, you listen to me. Invest your money in the organization if you wish. But as for the work, do be sensible and allow others to do it."

"Snob!"

"Why, Wanda Ericson!"

The girl rose and glanced at her own watch. "You'll have to excuse me, Aunt Rhoda, but I have an appointment with Mr. Borden. I'll count on you to buy at least

a thousand dollars' worth of things."

"I am quite content with my wardrobe, young lady."

Her head high, Rhoda Stoddard went across the old-fashioned room to the door, a fact which delighted dapper Mr. Borden hugely. He smiled and bowed shortly as Wanda Ericson appeared in the doorway of his office at the far corner of the big, oblong lounge. "I was beginning to wonder, Miss Ericson, if we could have our little chat today." He seated her and himself sat down. "And your distinguished father is well, I pray?"

"Quite well, Mr. Borden. He asked me to be sure to convey his regards to you. He has always been one of your admirers, it seems. He said it took rare courage and foresight for you to construct this building here on the desert."

"Your father is kind to me, Miss Ericson. Will you thank him, please, for his condescension?"

She inclined her golden head. He had no more changed than the lounge had changed. Time had made him a bit older, a bit thinner, a bit grayer, but that was all. Hail position, now and forevermore!

"I sympathized with him," said Mr. Borden firmly. "I felt that fate had dealt him a cruel blow. That is still my feeling, Miss Ericson. For so fine a gentleman to have been brought so low!" He shook his sparse head of gray-sprinkled brown hair. Behind the lenses of his glasses his eyes grew uncertain. "I sometimes wonder about life. How often, how very often, it hurts the good, the fine, the noble, and uplifts the mean, the base, the low." He looked down at the letter on the green blotter and scowled. "This is a case in point. It is an application for membership from a certain Mr. John Graves. One

of the new rich. It seems that oil was found on some property of his in California's San Fernando Valley, and now he fancies himself an important personage. He made millions from the war, in all sorts of devious ways, I am certain. And there he stands, affluent, while your unfortunate father has been laid low by adversity." Again he shook his head. "There is no justice, it seems to me, when such things can be permitted to happen."

"Oh, Dad is making a comeback, Mr. Borden. So am I, for that matter. Incidentally, you must allow me to thank you for your kindness."

"One stands ready at all times, Miss Ericson, to be of service to Ericsons. I am grateful to Fate for having placed me in the position to be of service to an Ericson."

"And of course Aimee Reynaud is grateful, too. Naturally if the show is a success she will reward you suitably, Mr. Borden."

His hands grew still on the desk. Color tinged his hollow cheeks and the tip of his nose. "Reward? But what nonsense is that, Miss Ericson? I have a duty to a lady and gentleman of distinction. Naturally I am prepared to discharge that duty with no thought of reward at the back of my mind."

She nodded. "My apologies, of course." Yet it seemed unfair to allow him to do so much for her without making compensation of some kind. "But still . . ."

He unbent to the extent of smiling in scornful fashion. "For that matter, Miss Ericson, there will be pay enough. It was necessary for me to admit Miss Stryton into the membership of this club. An insufferable pusher with no tradition behind her. The less said of her family stock the better. But her money does spend, and the

weight of that money was behind her, and I was constrained to lower the standards that once. Perhaps, however, this will tend to teach her her place? The effrontery of the woman. She actually dared telephone a threat to me to boycott this institution if I allowed you to take up your membership again. Now really, that is going too far. There can be no society if the gauge is money, not breeding. This is my position in the matter. The Ericsons are a fine old American family of excellent breeding, of excellent blood. As such they are entitled to respect, and I shall make it my business, you may rest assured, to put this upstart back into her proper place."

Even the clipped ends of his mustache seemed to bristle. Then he relaxed on the chair. "Do you think it would be an affront to your father, Miss Ericson, if I were to invite you to dinner one evening?" He sighed "I have always thought that it would be a signal honor to entertain an Ericson at my poor and humble board."

She recalled the decision she had made out in the car to be regal with her gratitude. She rose, shaking her head faintly. "I am sure, Mr. Borden, that you will understand when I say I have so many engagements."

Turning, she walked gracefully back to the door and disappeared.

An Ericson, thought Mr. Hubert Borden, an Ericson to her very bone. The thought warmed him. As long as such people existed in the world there would be standards.

Rising, he went out to the lounge to ask Mr. Luke-Patson if it were indeed true that one of his ancestors had once sat at cards with a King of England.

CHAPTER FOUR

The date and the details of the fashion show were worked out the following week at a conference which Wanda did not attend. Her flat refusal to involve herself in the mechanics of setting up the show brought the wrath of Aimee Reynaud down upon her head, and many were the dire predictions that if a certain spoiled brat didn't come down from her ivory tower a new clothes-horse would have to be found for a fashion-house in the making. But when Aimee returned to Quinby's Rest a few hours later all differences had been forgotten. Fairly purring with satisfaction, the talented redhead poured out the news in staccato sentences and words. "Borden is a drip. He has good ideas, though. There will be an orchestra. He will arrange for publicity. He thinks special invitations should be sent out. He suggests that only the very upper crust be invited. I'm to do all the announcing myself. You're to prevail upon others to show some of the things if you can. The atmosphere is to be that of a social, rather than the crass atmosphere of business."

She paused for breath. Then, sitting down on the couch in the cool, quiet lobby, she said quite bluntly:

"I think you ought to be a partner. Mr. Borden made it very clear that Ericsons are important and that gutter girls like myself are not. He's right, you know. I offer no more than hundreds of hopeful designers offer. I am here and all these wonderful things are going to happen because Ericsons are blue-bloods and because blue-bloods patronize their own."

"Rejected. As a matter of fact, I'm not even sure that the things should be displayed at the club." Wanda groped for words as Aimee gave her a look of astonishment. "We're selling out very cheaply, don't you think?"

Affection replaced astonishment on the freckled, snub-nosed face of Aimee Reynaud. Her quick mind anticipated some of the coming words, and now, as always, she marveled that a person of Wanda's background and training could feel so strongly on the subject. Had Quinby been the influence for good in the girl's early life on the plush estate in Garden City, New York? She rather suspected that Miss Rachel Quinby had. The kindest thing one could ever say about Wanda's father was that he had never hurt people who did not stand in his way. What a pirate Mr. Ericson had been in his suave, elegant way! And the girl's mother had died in childbirth, so that the only softening influence in the girl's life must have been Miss Rachel Quinby. She glanced across the lobby at the woman's office. One day, she decided, she would tell Miss Quinby that she had been a very good governess indeed. She shuddered to think about the woman Wanda would have become, Wanda with her temper, her obstinacy, her innate pride, if there hadn't been a Miss Quinby

around to teach her that democracy was more than a word and that people, regardless of money and position, were still people.

"Go ahead and say it," she advised, amused by the wrinkles in the girl's brow. "Get it out of your system."

"It is sacrificing principle for monetary gain. He helps because to him it is a battle between position and a person he calls an upstart. I don't like that part of it a bit. It is snobbery in action, false values and false standards at work. And it helps the world how, Miss Aimée Reynaud? Do you know what I think? I think that nine tenths of this world's trouble stems from the belief that one human being or one group is superior to the other. Oh, there is superiority in this world, I'm not denying that—superiority of accomplishment, superiority of thought, superiority of service to one's fellow creatures. And a society based upon thought and accomplishment and service is all to the good. But this sort of thing! I am an Ericson, and lo, the Ericsons have in their veins aristocratic blood, and in their genealogy are many names known to history and the royal houses of Europe. And Helene Peattie is a Stryton, and lo, the Strytons come from peasant stock that cannot be traced back any appreciable distance. Yet the Stryton Dairy Corporation has helped to bring the price of milk down into the reach of everyone, while Mr. Cranville Ericson came a cropper trying to establish a certain industrial monopoly that would have gouged much money from the ordinary working man. And the approach of Mr. Borden to all this is what? The aristocrat must be helped in the conflict with her inferior. Notice, please, that he is not help-

ing *you* Notice, please, that in the large he is not even helping *me* He has an idol, and the name of that idol is position, and so

"Time," chirped Aimee Reynaud "Now, then, to get back to business One third to you, one third to me, one third to our backer Is it a deal?"

"Our *what?*"

Aimee scowled "Darling, did you think that money grew on trees? For Pete's sake, how do you think I got the money to finance this trip, to say nothing of the manufacturing? A friend of mine helped, of course Thirty years old, handsome as they come, rich as all get out and still ambitious You must let me introduce you to him when he comes to Palm Springs

The door opened while Wanda was still digesting that Into the lobby stepped a chauffeur, and after a glance about he stepped with deference to the couch "Miss Ericson? I'm the Peattie chauffeur"

Thoughts of business drained from Aimee's mind As Wanda rose she noticed for the first time that Wanda was dressed in one of the company's linen suits and that every visible inch of Wanda Ericson had been scrubbed and groomed into perfection She had a sense, suddenly, of much going on around her that was not there for the eye to rest upon She jumped to her feet, struck by a sudden worry "Look, won't you please concentrate upon the important thing?"

"It is very important"

Ignoring the impassive chauffeur, Aimee reached out and grasped Wanda by the arm "It is ancient history Here we are, and wonderful things are happening to

us, and the future, the glorious future, is ours. For goodness sakes, be reasonable."

Wanda was genuinely astonished. She began to believe that Charles Dickens had spoken with authority when he had said that everyone's mind was a closed book that couldn't be read no matter how sharp your eyes were. She grew disgusted with Aimee Reynaud. "Oh, that! Great day in the morning, she'll give me no trouble there. She will fight her little fight and then yield to the inevitable. No, I have other things to discuss with Helene. My principles happen to be important to me, and she must understand that."

With that cryptic remark she turned and preceded the chauffeur from the hotel, leaving Aimee more confused than ever. As Miss Quinby came out of her office, the young designer walked briskly over to the desk and waylaid her. "Will you tell me," she demanded, "how a girl who is so bright can fool herself so utterly? That former charge of yours is an idiot heading straight for an awful fall."

"Wanda always did learn her lessons the hard way," smiled Miss Quinby. "The point is, however, that she did learn her lessons."

"Peattie is a louse. He junked her when her father went broke to marry the Stryton character with her milk millions."

The nose of Miss Quinby twitched. "Dear Miss Reynaud," she cooed, "it is obvious that one day you will be a woman of importance. Therefore, don't you agree that a happier manner of speaking is in order? I appreciate that you were born in the slums of New York. I am sen-

sible of the fact that often your way through life has been arduous. But does a noble tree wear earth in its leaves? Let us simply say that Mr. Michael Peattie lacks all those little qualities that go into the making of a true gentleman."

"When she talks about life and people she makes sense. But when she talks about Pettie and herself, then she is downright screwy."

Miss Quinby sighed. She glanced at the door and sighed again. "Just this once, Miss Reynaud, I will confess that sometimes your choice of words is commendably precise." She shook her head. When *would* little Wanda grow up?

Meanwhile, the car rolled through the streets of Palm Springs, rolled past imposing hotels and magnificent gardens, rolled by motels with big swimming-pools in their yards, rolled by people who had come to Palm Springs to escape stern winter and to gape at the sun-burned faces of the great. One hundred and thirteen miles from Los Angeles, standing in the lee of great Mt. San Jacinto that lifted its stone bulk ten thousand feet above the surrounding desert, the little township teemed with these people and was noisy with these people under the bright hot sun. Some seventy-five years ago the place had been little more than an oasis nurtured by the two streams flowing in from the mountains. It had been a depot for stagecoaches rumbling across the parched earth en route to Blythe. To it had come Indians to sit in the shade of the palms and to soak their tired bodies in the medicinal *agua caliente* bubbling up from the earth's interior to the earth's crinkled surface.

Then across the desert had snorted the iron horses of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, and the thunder of their wheels had been as drums sounding the tocsin of change. To the oasis had come a Mr J. G. McCallum to grow fruit upon a land gray and ragged with mesquite. To the oasis had come a Dr. Welwood Murray to create a health resort. America pushing forward to change the face of the land, America undoing in a matter of years the work Nature had been laboring at for countless centuries. Undoing that work for good, or for ill? The girl wondered about that as the car glided on past great shops and striped umbrellas and stands offering the biggest hot dogs on earth. Then, as the car halted in a traffic tangle, she heard a little girl cry out to her mother: "Gee, Mom, isn't Palm Springs wonderful?" She decided that all the changes had been for the better. There was the earth, and there were the people, and it was good and it was right for each to know the other.

The car moved on again as the traffic untangled itself, and turning left swept toward a white stuccoed house standing on a rise of green, iron-fenced ground. A house with green shutters! A house with colorful plantings around it and an iron quill functioning as a weather-vane on the roof. The sight sent a pang to her heart. The house Michael and she had built mentally over and over again in the moonlit silence of Palm Canyon. Not even the dream had been sacred to him. In his hurt, his horrible, horrible hurt, he had lashed out at her by usurping the dream house for his wife and himself!

Pale, she stepped out of the car before the bright red

front door and started up the steps of the little stoop. Her heart began to drum, and she could feel its concomitant beat in her temples and in her toes. A sense of dizziness made her quiver just as she had quivered last week when she had sat down on the couch in her room to read Michael's telephone message to her. Had he changed very much? Was his volatile face still as expressive as ever? And did he have that special way of snickering when something particularly amused him? And his eyes, his beautiful blue eyes! Would they smile when they saw her, or would they be like reproachful flames licking at her face? She leaned against the door jamb, suddenly helpless to press the bell-button. Perhaps she should visit them another time? Time, that was what she needed, time in which to think, time in which to put the various cabinets of her thought into proper order. After all, this was a serious business. Whether he loved her or didn't love her, he was still the husband of Helene Stryton. And the woman would be clever. She would use the protective features of the moral code to full advantage. She would cry out that marriage, blessed by God, was sacred. And unless she, Wanda Ericson, were carefully, properly prepared . . .

She jumped.

Down on the walk before the house Helene Peattie smiled faintly. "I said hello," she repeated. "I said welcome to Civilization's End."

It was remarkable, thought Wanda Ericson, how quickly confusion could be brought to an end. She turned. A tall, straight figure in the red linen suit, she smiled and held out her white-gloved hand. "Hello,

Helene. How nice of you to receive me so promptly."

Helene was as candid as ever. "It struck me that it might be a good idea. Come on around to the back. There are trees there and the view is always interesting." She turned, simply and comfortably attired in white shorts and white halter, sandals on her bare feet and a colorful ribbon about her bobbed, jet-black hair. She led the way around the house to a patio, moving briskly, a woman who was direct in her approach to life and would take no nonsense from the enervating sun. Waving Wanda to a metal lounging chair, she lighted a cigarette and blew a puff of smoke up at the cloudless face of the sky. "Incidentally, don't expect Mike to appear. The poor devil has been in an awful tizzy ever since he heard you were back. I sent him in to Banning to pick up some books for me. You remember how he is in a bookshop? He begins to browse, and the first thing he knows several hours have gone by. You look thinner, harder. Otherwise you haven't changed a bit."

Wanda nodded. "And it would seem that marriage agrees with you." She studied Helene's plump, dimpled face and strong jaw and chin. She studied the woman's figure, too. She shrugged. "I think a size sixteen would do for you. Isn't it comical? I am sure you never thought you would be asked to function as a clothes-horse at a fashion show."

"As a what?"

"Control," chuckled Wanda, "is a peculiar thing, isn't it? I have changed in many ways, Helene. I've had to. And one of the things I have learned is never to launch your attack at your adversary's fortified points.

Take your enemy by surprise, that's the ticket. And in a twinkling of an eye your enemy has lost her control and she is yours to take into camp."

"Oh, Lord," said Helene, "I thought you had grown up. Look, Wanda, I'm not happy about a lot of this. You won't believe it, but it all happened without premeditation on my part. I was swept off my feet and the deed was done. I was in a state of misery for a month afterward. I tried to write you all sorts of letters, but the words just refused to come. But all that is in the past. The fact remains that I am married to my Michael, that I love my Michael, and that I intend to remain married to my Michael."

"And will beat me over the head with the club of your money until I leave?" The girl's lips tightened. Andy Beckett, had he seen her then, would have changed his opinion of her, even as Helene Peattie suddenly did. In her quiet, attractive, clean-cut, wholesome way Wanda revealed herself to be a great deal more than a quitter. "How childish, Helene. Really, how very childish and demeaning that threat you telephoned to Mr. Borden was."

"An act of impulse. I'm sorry. Still, it would be a good thing for all three of us if you would pack up your wares and leave. What good will a battle do any of us? The fact exists. And facts continue to exist no matter what."

"The fact is, of course, that Michael and I will be married. Another fact is that I didn't come to discuss that. In its own good time and in its own good way Fate will arrange for that. But this other thing—Helene,

did you know that you're an upstart?"

Blue eyes flared. "Borden said that?"

"It is a belief held by many. And shall I tell you something more? If you persist in being silly, you will force yourself to resign from the club and Mr. Borden will accept your resignation. That would be unfair to you. You happen to like sports and the social life there."

"So the dear little aristocrat with her heart of gold has come here to invite me to model her clothes, to give me a graceful way out of a difficult predicament?"

"You don't hate me, Helene. Actually, you hate yourself. You know as well as everyone else did that you bought Michael, and you are, deep in your heart, ashamed of yourself."

The woman sprang to her feet, tense. "You dare? Why, you insignificant brat, you!"

"People who cut off their own noses to spite their faces are foolish, Helene. And I'm this way, amusing though it may seem to you. I happen to dislike snobbery. I happen to feel uncomfortable when I have an advantage I never earned. I like battles when they are waged on even terms. If we're to fight, then let's fight as human beings, not as rich upstart against impoverished aristocracy. All right?"

It dawned on Helene that a trap lay in the words, that the jaws of the trap were yawning wide to receive her. "And if I refuse to withdraw my objections I am made to appear, before Michael, as a bully using money as brass knuckles?"

"Naturally."

Helene sat down, sitting rigidly with her hands

folded on her lap. "Yet if I do appear it will throw you into contact with Michael, which is also what you want?"

"Naturally."

"You're a wretch, aren't you?"

The girl smiled, finding her first little victory in the epithet. "Wretched is the better word, Helene. You see, once upon a time I had a dream of love. Then things happened. My father was being smashed and he needed me. And in my futile attempt to help him I lost a happiness I wanted. To whom? Why, to my very best friend, of course, the sweet, sophisticated older woman who always had time for little, inexperienced me. I'm afraid that ever since then I have been wretched. Let me put it mildly, Helene. It isn't pleasant to lose fortune and the man you love and your best friend at one and the same time. It does something to you here, in your heart."

The color deepened on Helene's face. She felt cheap and frightened, and the scorn cut to the quick. "It wasn't premeditated, I tell you. I'm not that sort."

Wanda spoke on as though she hadn't heard. "It puts hatred into your heart, Helene. And hatred—well, that does indeed make one wretched."

"He never loved you!"

The girl's lips quirked in a little smile. She glanced at the fine house and the large tract of ground. "I'll tell you something, Helene: not even your money will help you this time."

Livid, the woman came again to her feet. "I order you off my property. I order you to leave Palm Springs!"

"Little girl commanding the waves to halt."

"For goodness sakes, Wanda, be reasonable!"

The girl didn't answer. Having said what she had come to say, having forestalled Mr. Borden's little plot, she went around the house to the limousine.

And into the heart of Helene Peattie crept fear, a fear that made her cold, a fear that drove her into the house. into Michael's office. She looked at him sitting there at the desk. He did love her, didn't he? He had gotten over that crush of his, hadn't he?

He smiled up from the typewriter. "Hello, there. Who was the company?"

"Oh, just Wanda Ericson. I've decided to model some clothes for her at the fashion show her firm is giving."

He flushed. "I'm working on a difficult scene," he said. "Please let me finish it, won't you?" He turned back to the typewriter.

CHAPTER FIVE

The publicity was complete, Mr. Borden saw to that. He saw to it as well that handsomely engraved cards of invitation were mailed to the proper persons over the signature of Wanda Ericson. Nor did his interest in the fashion-show wane when he learned that Helene Peattie was to be among the distinguished young ladies who would function as models on the evening of the little occasion. He was somewhat disturbed, of course. Drawing Wanda aside as the last rehearsal in the rotunda came to an impressive end, he looked her squarely in the eyes and inquired: "Why, Miss Ericson, why?" He felt that he had been badly let down. He had believed that she was as aware as he that in a world torn by dissension and class strife it was necessary for all who believed in standards to rally to their defense. "I must admit," he continued after a little sigh, "that you somewhat confuse me, Miss Ericson. You know what Mrs. Peattie attempted to do. And surely you must understand that there is no room in society for persons who have little to recommend them but their affluence. Money comes and money goes. To build a social structure upon it is equivalent to building an edifice upon

shifting sands. No, as a measure money is utterly useless. If society is to prosper . . ."

But that was as far as she permitted him to go. Once again she took advantage of his unbecoming worship of position. With regality she went to the window and looked out at the gibbous moon. "Isn't it for me to decide, Mr. Borden, if I am being demeaned by association with Mrs. Peattie?" She turned with her head high, her big brown eyes cool and somewhat imperious. "You must always be careful, Mr. Borden, not to give offense in your zeal to protect and to help. It suits my purpose to be generous with Mrs. Peattie. And may I remind you, pray, that generosity is an Ericson tradition? I happen to be quite sure of myself and of my position. I feel no need to ostracize my enemies. Do me the goodness, therefore, to permit me to decide who is and who is not suitable for an Ericson to know and to use."

He retreated to the refuge of his desk, a confused man in a sober black suit, winged collar and a black string necktie. He sat down as strange thoughts passed to and fro in his mind. Her tone had been brusque, too brusque. It had given offense. Looking at her as she had talked, he had noticed the tell-tale signs that work had left on her hands. It had occurred to him then that without his assistance her enterprise would fare badly. It had further occurred to him that he had in his savings accounts and investment portfolio a great deal more money than the last of the Ericsons had to their names. That realization kept popping back into his mind now as he sat staring at the landscape on the opposite wall. And his human pride, rankling, tingled

with the desire to bring her back to earth and the realities of their respective situations. The thought made him excited. A mere Borden establishing superiority over an Ericson! His pulse beat with the excitement of it and his head grew dizzy. He turned and studied the pink contours of her face. "I think—" he began; then incipient rebellion was quelled by habit and the very genuine regard he had for lineage, tradition and breeding. He saw behind her the shadowy forms of all the Ericsons who had lived before her, Ericsons who had fought bravely in the many wars of Europe, Ericsons who had commanded expeditions to the New World, Ericsons who had been captains of industry and social queens in their cities and states and nations almost since time immemorial. As their names rang like the notes of a bell in his mind, his spirit began to shrivel. He saw his idea for what it was, simply a delusion. Let him acquire ten million dollars, let her sink to slums living and near starvation, and the superiority of a Borden to an Ericson would still exist only in his own mind, if there. She belonged. By virtue of her lineage and her breeding she was of the elect, and not all the accomplishment in the world would reverse their respective situations. She was a part of society, she would always be a part of society. Even in these days of her penury she could mingle, and she chose to, on terms of equality with ladies and gentlemen to whom he would always be merely a servitor.

He sighed, and bowed to the facts. Turning to her, he smiled, revealing small, beautifully preserved white teeth. "Please accept my apology," he said, not without dignity. "Actually, I was not criticizing you, Miss Eric-

son. I would not dare to be so presumptuous. I was simply confused. I did not quite understand. Please forgive me. And please, I beg, allow me to compliment you. To-day family tradition seems to mean little. It is such a comfort to know that to one person, at least, her family traditions have a real meaning."

"We shall say no more about it, Mr. Borden." The girl went to the door, anxious for a breath of fresh, democratic air. She was beginning to understand why so many people had so many false values, and this comprehension had the effect of nauseating her slightly. Meeting Aimee out in the corridor, she shook her golden head angrily. "How can there be happiness in the world," she demanded, "when people bow down to so many silly myths?"

Aimee looked at her with a new respect, and with a certain relief. "Meaning that Mr. Borden has once again allowed society to run roughshod over him? Whew, that is something to know."

"You doubted?" Nanda chuckled with amusement. "Really, what a pessimist you are! But of course he had to yield. It wasn't right that we should be helped for such a reason. I despise Helene Stryton, true, but not because she is a so-called upstart. Accomplishment is the only standard that should mean anything, and certainly the Strytons have accomplished much. And I won't encourage snobbery no matter what it costs us, so there."

"But if he had blown his top, honey? I shudder to think of the consequences."

"I knew he wouldn't. Aside from being a man easily

clubbed into submission by position, he is also an instrument of Fate. Aimee, you may laugh at me, but all along I have been certain that Fate intended us to be successful. I felt that way before I saw Helene, and I still feel that way."

The redhead was still dubious. She glanced at the closed office door and shrugged. "Well, we'll see what he actually does."

"He'll continue to help, you'll see."

There was a hoot at a girl who believed that Fate was working on her side, but the following afternoon all hoots ended. To Quinby's Rest came Mr. Borden with a flock of new ideas, and when he left several hours later, even Aimee's cup of happiness was filled to the point of running over. To Palm Springs they had come, following their lucky star, and now, even in the clear light of day, that star was shining with a strong, easily perceived golden glow! In a mood to celebrate, she invited Wanda out to dinner, and Wanda accepted with the understanding that the bill would be paid by their backer, Mr. John Graves. She showered and put on gay, jonquil yellow lingerie. In the mood to make it a real celebration, she decided that the Hotel Truelsen was the place to go, and that the green gown of taffeta and nylon net was the only gown truly suited to the occasion. She went to the closet and took it from the rack. Enchanted as always by the beautiful needlework, she put the gown on and stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror. A new respect for Aimee's talent thrilled through her. Usually such an elaborate gown left her cold, but in this instance bouffant skirt and molded bodice and the gown's insouciant lines struck her as be-

ing exactly right for her. She wagged her golden head from side to side. What better tribute could you pay to a designer's ability than to feel you looked your best in a gown you ordinarily would not have thought of wearing? Onto her feet she drew matching slippers of deceptive fragility and clicked on dainty heels to the hall door. Opening it, she started up the hall to announce that in her opinion the firm's designer was a real genius. Even the swish of the gown was right, even the feel of the gown was perfect. But at that point the telephone rang. Going back into her room, she answered it. Then all thoughts of dinner, of celebration, disappeared.

Thoughtful, she put on more appropriate clothes and went hurriedly to the garage at the back of the small hotel. This time she didn't forget to lock the car before she went down into the Canyon. nor did she burst into tears the moment she had stepped into the clump of cottonwoods and willows at the base of the towering Washingtonia palms. Meeting the blue eyes of Michael Peattie, she sighed faintly. Then slowly she sat down on a log and dissembled.

"How brown you are, Michael. I think that life out here on the desert has done you a great deal of good. Yes, and your marriage to Helene, of course. Really, what a fine woman she is. Has she told you that she's helping us with the fashion-show? Michael, you were very fortunate to have found a wife like Helene. Do you know that?"

"I know it." He sat down on the ground before her, his back supported by the round, smooth bole of a cottonwood. In the waning sunlight his lips worked, but

no further sound came. A stocky man of thirty, he searched her face with his eyes and then lifted his gaze, when she grew self-conscious, to the wall of the Canyon far behind her.

"I'm glad you do," she said firmly. "Actually we just had a crush on one another. It had no real meaning."

He found his tongue, and something warm and strange flowed out of him into the quiet air of the Canyon. "Or it had all meaning, Wanda, all the meaning such things can possibly have."

She bit her lip while her sense of confusion deepened. She wondered if it had been a good idea to come running the instant he had called. If indifference was supposed to rule the day, then hadn't consistency demanded a casual refusal, a matter-of-fact announcement that one of these afternoons she would have lunch with him? She looked down moodily at the ground, resenting all the women she had ever known who had been able to play such games so skillfully. How did those women control lips that were hungry for kisses? How did they control hands that wanted to shoot through the atmosphere to the coarse black hair of their loved ones? Yes, and how did they control hearts that kept leaping with the joy of the past and cried out for the same joy in the present? She felt her cheeks burn with emotion. And then, recalling the telephoned message she'd received from him her first afternoon back in Palm Springs, she found the words and the control.

"It couldn't have had such meaning," she replied lightly. "If it had had such meaning we very obviously would be married by now. Goodness, then what would

poor Andy Beckett do? No, Michael, it was just one of those things and you know it."

"But it wasn't sensible, you see." He laughed at himself, wondering what had ever become of the ideals and principles he'd had in distant dear old England as a child. "A writer of commercial stories, you see, very seldom makes money to speak of. The public wishes to be entertained, yes, but all too often the public rents its books rather than buys them, and the impact of that stinginess is rather harsh on a writer's income. And you had lost your capital, so there would be no funds forthcoming from your father. Under the circumstances, what else was there for me to do but marry Helene?"

"Michael!"

He smiled, and for the first time there were the remembered dimples in his cheeks. She recalled that the first time she had met him his dimples had filled her with a certain dismay. "Good heavens," she had said to her father, "no real *man* has dimples." Because of the dimples she had refused numerous invitations to dine with Michael and to swim with Michael and to dance with Michael. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the episode of the bucking bronco . . .

"That's the way the world is," he said, cutting through her thoughts. "Mind, I don't say I approve of such behavior. Men should support their wives and all that, eh? But come. What is a chap supposed to do when he finds himself in this predicament I found myself in. It was a question of giving up my writing, or giving you up. As I saw it, I had no alternative."

She found control again. He had always been so ob-

vious! He was no more able to tell a good fib now than he had ever been. She had a maternal yearning to tell him that, to tell him that when you owned such a volatile, expressive face you were foolish to try to tell falsehoods. But she managed to stifle that yearning. "Particularly," she said, "you had no alternative when you understood all along that it was simply a crush. Ah, well, it has worked out nicely, hasn't it? You have Helene and she has you, and I have my work and Andy Beckett. Michael, do you think I ought to marry Andy?"

"I think you ought to go away." Now he rose, and his face grew stern. "The deed is done. There. I won't insult your intelligence by denying that I loved you, or that I love you now. You know better; so do I. But the point is that I have what I want."

She shrugged. Meeting his burning blue eyes, she rose and walked across the clearing. An impulse caused her to rise to tiptoe, to kiss first his chin, then his warm lips. Then horror gripped her and she drew away from him tensely. "You see? It's just an idea. Don't you see, Michael?"

The trouble was that he did see. How could he look at her and not see it all there on her face? He felt pity for her, and shame for himself. He had a notion that he had lost almost as much as he had gained, and his imaginative writer's mind played momentarily with thoughts of what might have been if the appeal of Helene's solid bank account hadn't been irresistible. Then as she sighed his mind returned to the present. "The point is," he said gently, "that I want you to see how silly all this is. Listen, Wanda. I don't for an instant

feel proud of myself. But as I see it there are different, very different worlds for the rich and the poor. Call it shameful, but I grew afraid of the world of the poor a long time ago. You people in the States here don't know the real meaning of the word poverty. You should see some of the streets of London, and some of the people there. It is vast, demeaning poverty. It enters your flat, it enters into your very clothes. And if you read as I read, if you knew something more pleasant existed—well, the poverty was even worse. So now I live in the pleasant world. When I desire a suit of clothes I buy it. When I yearn to travel, then I travel. And all that, my dear, means more to me in this dreadfully practical world than the fine glow of love, the singing heart celebrated by the poets. Mind you, I'm not opposed to love. I simply believe that its capacity to give enduring happiness has been vastly overrated."

"Do you, really?"

He flushed, unable quite to understand her. The memory of her that he had brought down into the Canyon had been the memory of the girl she had been two years and five weeks ago. He had half-expected to find a romantic child waiting for him here in this clump of cottonwoods and willows. But she had not been the first to arrive, nor had she brought youth with its romantic notions down the trail with her. It bothered him. He didn't quite like the scorn in her eyes, nor did he quite like the disdainful smile on her lips. He felt suddenly like a boy before this woman, and a very foolish boy at that. It stung him.

"Yes, I do really think that. So how much will you

take of Helene's money to leave?"

"None. And you give yourself such airs, Michael. Why, I honestly think you believe I'm still in love with you. But goodness, haven't I told you about Andy?"

"A cowboy."

His contempt deepened her smile. "A very solvent one, Michael. And young, and handsome, and in love with me after his fashion. I think it will be an excellent match, don't you?"

That question bothered him, too. So casually asked, as though the whole thing were true. As though—"You're not *serious*?"

She found exactly the right words. "Once upon a time, Michael, I was a child. And you were a great writer and a handsome man and I lost a child's heart to you. But that was over two years ago, and I have done much growing up since then. Now, to put it kindly, I know that you weren't the best of writers nor the handsomest of men. And I know something more. This that I feel for Andy is adult. What I felt for you was juvenile. And that is why, Michael, I was so amused when I got your telephone message—and your summons here. I thought you had gotten over the crush, too. I thought that surely in your marriage to Helene you had found everything you had sold yourself for. But to be told the contrary, to know the contrary . . . Michael, do you know what? If I were the vindictive type I think I would say that your punishment has certainly fitted the crime. But I'm not the vindictive type at all. Since I never really loved you, I can not really hate you. And now you will excuse me, won't you? You see, I have so many things to do. And you needn't be afraid, Michael,

that I shall come between you and Helene. I would have to be interested to do a thing like that, and since the interest isn't there . . ."

She broke off. As he spun on his heel and left without a word she sat down on the log again. Elation sang through her, and her eyes became great and glowing. She had done it! She had actually gone and done it! She had been right all along! He *did* love her. And when a man in love was tantalized enough, when a man in love was tormented enough . . . She looked up at the towering palms. Then very clearly she said: "Helene, do you want to bet?"

She wondered why he had fibbed about marrying Helene for her money. As though it wasn't perfectly obvious that flight and long silence had wounded him and that in his pain he had sought the anodyne of Helene's love! The goop, why hadn't he admitted that? Why had he tried to kill the love he really wanted? Because marriage was a covenant made between two human beings and God? She shook her head. Marriage was sacred only if it was based upon love! If it hadn't been based upon love then . . . She sighed, just as Michael Peattie, starting his Buick roadster, began to do some wondering, too.

He wondered why she had lied about Andy Beckett. He also wondered what sort of devil's game she was playing.

Questions. In the afternoon more questions and still more questions, while the sun sank in the sky and the man selected by Fate to answer those questions signed the register of the Hotel Golden Desert back in Palm Springs.

CHAPTER SIX

His name was John Wilbur Graves. He wrote it with a heavy hand on the page of the register, and accepted from the clerk several important-looking business letters that had already been received for him. He rewarded the quick service with a quick, generous tip, then turned and followed the waiting bellboy to the elevator. A tall athletic man, a figure of grinning informality with red hair and freckles and genial green eyes, he rewarded the bellboy with a handsome tip, too, then stripped and went into the blue-tiled bathroom for a shower. Ten minutes later he was in bed, sound asleep. Awakening in the night's cool, he dressed again and had a snack in the hotel's coffee-shop and drove across the desert to Indio, where he had several large date gardens. Business held him in Indio for a week, and for a time it appeared as though business would prevent him from attending the fashion-show in Palm Springs. But by dint of driving himself and his foremen hard, he wound up his affairs in that growing city in good time and returned to the winter resort. He found that in his absence more mail had come for him and, never a person to concern himself with pleasure when there was a dol-

lar to be made, he went down the hall to the public stenographer's office to dictate some correspondence to the elderly lady seated in dignity behind the small, very tidy desk. Meeting the eyes of Abraham Waldman, he chuckled. Shaking the hand of the plump gentleman, he relaxed for the first time since he had abandoned Colorado's snowy slopes to see what Aimee Reynaud was really doing with the money he had loaned her at a commendably low rate of interest. "You look well," he told the genial movie producer. "Still as fat as ever, but at least there's good color in your cheeks."

"Reba," rumbled Abraham Waldman with a comical shake of his gray head. He finished dictating a letter to the public stenographer and led the boy across the hall to the terrace overlooking the desert. Under a colorful umbrella he sat down, and after a careful glance around drew a cigar from the breast pocket of his blue linen jacket. He lighted up and heaved a long, happy sigh. "Golf is a fine game, you understand. I say nothing against golf, Johnny. But to play it every day, not for the pleasure it affords you, but for reasons of health! But Reba is adamant. I have fallen into her ill graces, and this is her way of punishing me."

The redhead grinned. "You just hate her, don't you, Mr. Waldman? You regret that you ever married her."

The twinkling green eyes pleased Abraham Waldman. The first time he had met Johnny Graves the boy had been unable to joke, unable to forget himself to the extent of being able to perceive the genuine happiness of others. The boy had worried him just as all young men who were too intense worried him. Once he had

predicted to Reba that Johnny Graves would have a serious nervous breakdown, and after a week of considering the problem from all angles he had all but forced the young man to go away for a little vacation. That had been a year ago, and often during that year he had wondered if Johnny Graves had yet mastered the art of relaxing, of living. It occurred to him now that the boy had at least changed in a few particulars. Now, at least, he could make jokes!

"Well," he said cautiously, "as long as Reba isn't around I will admit that she has some good points, too. You must come and have dinner with us one evening. I offer you noodle pudding as the lure. You haven't forgotten Reba's noodle pudding, have you?"

"Whenever I think of noodle pudding, sir, I think of Mama Reba." He took his engagement pad from the inner pocket of his jacket. "But we had better make it next week. It seems that I have some business interests in this town. Don't laugh. But I am actually involved in the business of creating and manufacturing very expensive clothes for the carriage trade. That is to say, I will be in that business if the show my friends are giving to-night is a success. By the way, you and your wife must attend. I have a fine person I particularly want you to meet."

The brown eyes of Abraham Waldman sharpened. "Oh, you are the money behind Miss Ericson and Miss Reynaud? Well, now! Johnny, that Miss Ericson is one of the loveliest young ladies I've met in years. But so unhappy!" He pursed his lips and clasped his hands over his corporation. "One of these days you and I must

have a long chat about Miss Ericson. I liked her. You will laugh and call me a sentimental fool, but she reminded me, with her sobs, of my Susan. Besides, it isn't good for young girls to be that unhappy. I want Reba to help her, and so far she hasn't accepted my invitation to visit us."

It irritated Johnny Graves. He had gotten the full story of Wanda Ericson from Aimee in New York six months ago. He had not liked the idea of reposing so much hope in the society girl with the good connections. "She sounds rattle-brained to me," he had told Aimee, and he had suggested that Aimee find someone else. But that had been a difficult thing for Aimee to do. A slums girl with no one around to introduce her to other impoverished society ladies, she'd finally been compelled to insist that Wanda Ericson was the only person available for the work. And there had been a glow in her eyes, too, which had told him that Aimee really hadn't looked around for someone else. Friends! As though friendship could be allowed to intrude into business matters! His first instinct had been to tell her that there would be no money until Aimee had gotten herself a different partner. But it had been impossible to be strictly business with Aimee. Her family had been good to him as a child. Often the difference between eating and not eating had been the generosity of Aimee's night-watchman father. Presently he had yielded. "Well, we'll give her a chance," he had said, and on the spot he had written Aimee a five thousand dollar check with which to make up her clothes and pay their expenses to Palm Springs. Five thousand dollars . . . and the rattle-brained

society girl was still running true to type!

"You can't help people like that, Mr. Waldman," he said crisply. He stared off across the desert at some riders on paint horses. It seemed strange to think that two weeks ago he had been in Ouray, Colorado, watching a blizzard grip the valley and the surrounding peaks in the stern hand of winter. "They're rattle-brains, so they make their own grief. If you really want to help someone I'll give you some names. Names of nice people, too."

Abraham Waldman stiffened. "Johnny, you have still to learn many things about life and about people. That girl has a serious emotional problem, and that is all there is wrong with her. It has made her bitter and perhaps cynical and self-centered. But the trouble is simply lost faith in people. Eliminate the problem and you eliminate the rest. There. I expect you to bring her to see Reba one of these evenings, all right?"

Johnny smiled and knew a great fondness for the man. Ah, he was a shrewd man of business, was Abraham Waldman, but he had a heart. Looking at him, Johnny Graves wished that he himself had a heart. It would be nice, he thought, to be as popular and respected and loved as Abraham Waldman. He wished that a long time ago in the slums of New York life for himself hadn't taken the turn it had. He wished that when he was a boy he had found something to believe in.

"Well, we'll see about that." He consulted his watch and rose. "Now I had better get those letters dictated. Give my love to Mama Reba, won't you?"

He went back to the public stenographer's office and spent the next two hours in dictation. Then, covering a yawn, feeling the effects of all the hard work he had done in Indio during the past week, he went back to his room for a nap. Promptly at the appointed hour, attired in a beautiful tuxedo, every wisp of his wiry red hair in place, he presented himself at the door of the rotunda and handed his ticket to the fussy, mustached gentleman standing guard at the door. "Mr. Graves?" Behind the thick lenses of his glasses the man's eyes grew cool. "Oh, yes. I am Mr. Borden, Mr. Graves. I wonder if you will do me the kindness of having a chat with me in my office after the show? It concerns your application for membership, of course."

"If I have the time I might do that."

Mr. Borden bristled. But there behind the ill-mannered young man stood the Misses Abercrombie and Stilwell. He bowed unctuously as the insolent youth brushed by him. "Good evening, ladies. How delightful to see you here. You will find that a very agreeable crowd has assembled. This way, ladies, if you please." He personally led them into the large room and seated them under the glass-paned cupola where they could look up and see the stars blazing in the sky. Then, glancing at the well-bred ladies and gentlemen who had accepted the invitations, he smiled with a quiet pride and closed the doors of the little lobby. For the first time since he had received the most gracious letter from Mr. Ericson he relaxed. He had kept the faith. To an Ericson he had done all due honor. The way had been long and difficult. The threat of Helene Peattie had

been put down and slowly, step by step, the fashion-show had been built up from an idea into something that would enhance the prestige of the club while at the same time it gave delight to his honored members and served to assist an Ericson in the most tangible of ways. In a rosy glow of satisfaction, he took a seat as near to Mrs. Rhoda Stoddard as he could, with propriety, take. Then as the curtains parted on stage and the little orchestra swung into a brisk march, he gave his full attention to the proceedings. When Aimee Reynaud appeared in a black, sequin-studded gown, he applauded with the rest. He was not quite certain that a girl of her dubious background should have been given so important a part in the show, but such was his mood that he forgave her her undistinguished background. After all, he thought, this is America, isn't it, and she is a friend of an Ericson, is she not?

The words came softly and pleasantly through the microphone, welcoming one and all to the evening's festivities and thanking one and all for having taken the time to put in an appearance. It seemed to Johnny Graves that it was a wishy washy, overly humble speech, and as he sat listening to it he found it all but impossible to believe that this elegant woman on the stage was the Kitty Dolan who had once been one of the most rambunctious kids on the East Side block. He shook his head as the first model appeared in some linen thing that had been designed for spectator-sports wear. It had all led to this? He marveled. He wondered how many times her mother had told Kitty that "drawing pictures on a hunk of paper is just wasting time." But Kitty had

plugged away at her work and her studies. Once on a roof overlooking the East River with its barges and its tugs, she had told him, with shining eyes: "I have a dream, Johnny. I have a dream that one day I'll design beautiful clothes and that very beautiful society ladies will wear them. I have a dream that I was born to do that, Johnny. Tell me, do you think the dream will come true?"

A mist came into his eyes. Plucky kid! There had been the dream, and she had followed the dream and clung to the dream no matter how difficult life had become for her. And there she stood in a black flashing gown, and here in this beautiful room were the society ladies looking at the clothes she had designed, and buzzing with excitement as one model followed another model across the stage. He felt warm, suddenly, with a strange tide of happiness. And suddenly he thought of fat Mr. Waldman who made it a policy always to help people when ever he could. "The giver," Mr. Waldman had once told him, "always gets more than he gives." At the time he had hooted at the sentimental man, but now he began to understand what Mr. Waldman had meant. Five thousand dollars? Why, what a cheap price to pay for the look of happiness suffusing Kitty's face, for the babble all around him that said in unmistakable terms that Kitty's genius was at last being appreciated! He began to wonder if perhaps he hadn't put too much emphasis on the getting part of life. He began to wonder if he shouldn't begin to emulate Mr. Waldman with his big understanding heart and generous ways.

Then wonder stopped as a shock of delight ran like an

electric current ran through him. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Good grief, he thought, I'm dreaming! Opening his eyes, he looked again, looked as the tall girl with the golden hair floated across the stage in a beautiful green gown that brought oh's and ah's from the ladies seated around him. Wanda Ericson? He swallowed, and thought of spring creeping across the flat lands of Maryland's Eastern Shore. Tingling, he followed her with his eyes until she made her exit to a storm of applause. Miss Wanda Ericson, rattle-brain? He suddenly felt very foolish. He suddenly understood why the eyes of Abraham Waldman had looked at him so pityingly for a moment that afternoon. Good grief, that girl was a looker! She was every bit as beautiful as both Mr. Waldman and Kitty had said she was! An aristocrat she might be, but by the eternal, she had warmth to her, too. He shook his head, astonished. Was it possible that all his life he had been wrong about aristocrats? Was it possible that all his life he had been wrong about a great many things?

He grew restless for another sight of the society girl who had befriended an ambitious dress-designer she had met, one afternoon, in one of New York's dreary settlement houses. His interest in the show as such waned. The sight of clothes and more clothes bothered him. Heaven knew they were attractive enough, but he failed to understand why people had to sit around for an hour or more looking at them. A store was the place for clothes, by golly; why was so much fuss being made about them here? He resented the fuss and the vases filled with fragrant roses and the soft lights and the

overly sweet strains of the orchestra. He felt like jumping to his feet and roaring to elegant Kitty Dolan: "Chiggers, the cops!" Nor did he understand why Kitty was using Wanda Ericson so sparingly. As the aristocrat came out again in something white and fluffy, he came to the conclusion that from now on the fashion-house would get along with just one model. By thunder, he might not understand clothes, but he did know business. You got somewhere when you led with your best and continued to lead with your best. And there on the stage, introducing Aimee Reynaud to the crowd as "the cleverest designer I have ever met," was the firm's ace saleswoman.

Thoughtful, he got to his feet and went briskly to the door as the lights were turned on. Out in the lobby he glanced about, then ducked in through a door that opened into a long, narrow corridor. Almost at once there was an indignant cry behind him, and turning around, he found himself confronted by Mr. Borden again. He grinned, retorting, "Thought I'd go back and congratulate the ladies, fellow. By the way, did you know that I'm a partner in the firm?"

"A partner?" Mr. Borden stammered. "But I thought—"

"Miss Ericson puts up the connections, Miss Reynaud puts up the designs, and I put up the money. Incidentally, you might send my card to the Hotel Golden Desert. You have a nice place here, fellow. I'll tell you something more. You're a shrewd man of business—yes, and a fellow with real guts. Not everyone would have taken a gamble as big as this, I'll tell you that. A club like this out on the desert? Hey, I doubt that I'd have

had the guts to build it."

Mr. Borden's face grew stern. "I must ask you to be more careful of your language, Mr. Graves. This is, after all, a family club. As for your card, apparently you did not receive my letter. It is a rule of the club, sir, that applications for membership must bear the sponsoring signatures of three persons who are already members."

There was a coldness that Johnny felt, and resented. His smile faded and his green eyes flashed. "Oh, it's that sort of place. I apologize. I wasn't aware of that rule."

Mr. Borden grew less stern, pleased with the boy's tone if not with his manner. "You surely understand, Mr. Graves, that I cannot just open my doors to any one. My clientele is a distinguished one. My membership list is long, because visitors to Palm Springs realize that here in this little corner of the world, at least, certain standards are still respected and maintained."

Through the door came more people, and Mr. Borden bustled to meet them, all fawning importance. "Mr. Peattie. Mr. Beckett. Ah, and Mrs. Stoddard. Mrs. Stoddard, weren't the clothes simply divine? Of course, the designer has no breeding to speak of, but with the help of Miss Ericson the woman has certainly turned out some remarkably tasteful things."

"Simply beautiful things, Mr. Borden." The plump woman smiled. "And how nice it was of Michael to allow Helene to function as one of the models. Michael, I particularly want to congratulate you. There might have been a mess. But as it was . . ."

Everyone jumped.

"Yippee!" came the shout again. "We did it!" At the other end of the hall another door opened, and through

it came a redhead and a blonde to caper like human beings gone insane. Grinning, Johnny turned and hurried over to congratulate them. "Swell," he roared to Aimee Reynaud. "You may not be a blueblood, honey, but you sure wowed the gentry with your talent, I'll tell you that."

"Johnny!" Squealing, tears rolling down her cheeks, Aimee threw herself into his arms. "You big galoot, I kept waiting and waiting for you. Johnny, was it all right? Were some of the things really good?"

He turned as the people behind them came hurrying up. He met the black eyes of Mrs. Stoddard and shrugged. "Shucks, Aimee, maybe you had better ask the lady here. Lady, what did you think of the fancy duds?"

An anguished cry broke from the lips of Mr. Borden. "Mrs. Stoddard, young man, Mrs. *Stoddard!*"

Rhoda Stoddard chuckled. "I've been called Lady before, Mr. Borden." She considered the tense face of Aimee Reynaud, then patted the girl's cheek. "Perhaps the best way of saying it is this: I will be pleased to discuss my wardrobe with you one of these afternoons, Miss Reynaud. Wanda here will tell you about my likes and dislikes, I'm sure."

Andy Beckett grinned. He turned from Wanda and all but kissed the dignified figure of Mrs. Rhoda Stoddard. "Ma'am," he drawled in his Texas twang, "any time you find yourself running short of beef, just you get in touch with me."

"A good show," said Michael Peattie. His eyes rested on the face of Wanda Ericson. "You were very lovely, Wanda."

It was then that Johnny Graves received the jolt of

his young life. The golden-haired aristocrat smiled, then came walking toward him with her light, airy step. "Was I, Michael? Well, you must give Johnny Graves here credit for that. It isn't every night, is it, that a girl has the opportunity to look across footlights at the face of her fiancé, is it?"

There was a gasp from Aimee, and an outcry from Andy Beckett.

"Dearest," said Wanda Ericson, "why did you take so long to come?"

Before Johnny could more than blink his eyes the aristocrat was in his arms and her lips were warm and sweet against his.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The news got around, as such news usually does. Actually it was an insignificant piece of news that had no impact whatsoever upon Palm Springs in general. People still came and went from the resort city, people still played their games of golf or swam in the pools or rode horseback across the desert or steeped their aches and pains in the hot mineral springs. But nevertheless it was an interesting and exciting piece of news to those who knew Wanda and the Peatties, Johnny Graves and Aimee Reynaud, nee Kittv Dolan.

In their suite in the Hotel Truellen, Reba Waldman looked up from the afternoon paper at her husband and shook her dark head. "This I'm not liking a single bit, Abie. This kissing business with our friend Johnny, I mean. Abie, our friend Johnny isn't a man to be loving or marrying. You know what he reminds me of? He reminds me of the cop in Court Street in Brooklyn who used to give tickets even to our customers. Like that cop, Johnny hasn't got a heart. Like that cop, Johnny is always thinking of Johnny."

In robe and slippers, a cigar clenched between his teeth, Abraham Waldman looked up from his writing-

desk. He had not forgotten the inspiration that had come to him in Palm Canyon. In the month he had been in Palm Springs, scarcely a day had gone by that hadn't seen him adding something to the story he wanted to film there. And presently, as it happens when you think story, story, story, he had found the peg upon which to hang his characterizations. With typical excitement he had promptly canceled all golf engagements, and had bought several ruled pads in the little stationery store on Thrace Avenue. *Scene One*, he had written in big letters, and under this he had sketched in the physical description of the canyon, recommending a long-shot view of the place in general, then a close-up of the stream which was all that remained of the great sea that had once washed the face of the land. On the verge of working in the narrator's initial statement, he took the interruption hard. "Reba," he said gently, "it's difficult to wring a story from one's brain. And it doesn't help to be wrenched from your work just when you're beginning to feel the setting and know your various characters." He glanced at his watch. "Look, why don't you go to the swimming-pool and take another lesson from the professional? We'll talk about Johnny some other time."

"With my eyes I weep for you, Abie. So busy you are making money that you can't think of a poor girl's unhappiness. This is my husband? Pfui! Next week I'm going to Reno for a divorce."

He sighed and screwed the cap back onto his fountain pen. She was right, as usual. How could he give happiness and pleasure to motion-picture audiences if he was indifferent to the happiness of one single indi-

vidual? He waddled across the room to an armchair and knocked the ash from his cigar. "My apologies," he said. "And don't even mention that word in a joke."

She got up from her chair and crossed the room. She kissed his forehead and the tip of a nose that was now very brown. "I'm loving you very much, Abie. And maybe we should discuss it later? Yes, you're busy, and a movie about all those Cahuilla Indians will be a good movie to make."

He frowned. "Hang it, that girl baffles me, baffles me utterly. She is not in love with Johnny, you know. As a matter of fact, I understood from something that Johnny said that he didn't even know her." He grunted. "I feel the presence of a plot, Reba, a very, very ridiculous little scheme. I don't like to say this, but I have a notion that the girl is trying to use Johnny Graves."

She went back to the chair, her sensitive face aghast. "But doesn't she know that on this earth no one is using Johnny? Abie, this is madness!"

He was quite inclined to agree with her. "Making Michael Peattie jealous won't help. He is married to Helene Stryton, and that is that. You know, I sometimes wonder how much hope there is for the world when people can be so silly. Emotions. There, that is the trouble, Reba: there are too many emotions. They interfere with one's ability to think, and the first thing you know an otherwise intelligent person is behaving like a fool."

"This girl I'm seeing at once!"

Her face very red, her dark eyes snapping, Reba whirled and went into the bedroom. Doors slammed

and drawers banged and in the bathroom the water ran and ran. When she stepped back into the living room half an hour later she was in a dark dress and a wide-brimmed straw and the shoes that pinched. He burst into a chuckle. "Why don't you throw those shoes away? Why don't you put on something comfortable?"

She was horrified. "Abie," she demanded, "I should look like a hobo?"

Ten minutes later she stepped into the quiet lounge of Quinby's Rest and smiled at the elderly lady behind the desk. "Miss Wanda Ericson, if you please. I'm Reba Waldman."

The old governess stiffened. An expression of incredulity passed over her thin, wrinkled face. Then her expression grew guarded. "Have I the honor," she asked in her stiff, astringent way, "of speaking to the wife of the motion-picture producer, Mr. Abraham Waldman?"

"This is an honor?" Reba, dumbfounded, glanced around the quiet lobby. "Dearie, I'm just plain Reba Waldman in tight shoes that are pinching me something awful."

From the throat of Miss Rachel Quinby came a little sympathetic cluck. She hurried into her apartment and came out with a pair of slippers. Leading Mrs. Waldman to a couch, she had the woman take off the shoes and put the slippers on. "One makes an error," she said stiffly, "to bow down to style. I have always insisted, Mrs. Waldman, that it is the duty of designers to make shoes for the feet, not to expect feet to be made for shoes. I am Miss Rachel Quinby, former governess to Miss Ericson."

"This is a pleasure, Miss Quinby."

"I was about to have tea, Mrs. Waldman. May I have the honor of your company at tea?"

Reba hesitated, then nodded her head. It was a shame, she thought, that the woman was so stiff, so formal, but she liked her at once and quite happily followed her across the lobby into a small apartment with geraniums growing in pots on the window-sills and parakeets noisy and colorful in window cages. She sat down on a studio couch covered with dark green and settled back against the bright orange cushions. "A very nice little home, Miss Quinby. And such nice birds! Always I'm liking birds. In New York in our apartment Abie and I had canaries. Oh, it used to give me such pleasure to hear them singing in the morning. I used to lie there on my bed and listen to the pretty singing of the birds. I'm always saying to my Abie that the real music of the world is made by the birds."

"I agree with you, Mrs. Waldman." Miss Quinby went out into the kitchenette and made the tea. "Darjeeling," she informed her guest. "I am sure you will like it."

Reba Waldman nodded. Her preference was coffee, not tea, but she nobly sipped it and broadly smiled in approval. "This is like drinking flowers, Miss Quinby. Miss Ericson was very lucky, I'm thinking, to have you as her governess."

"I was lucky, too, Mrs. Waldman." The severe face of Miss Rachel Quinby softened. "She was the girl, I dare say, that I wanted but never had. Naturally I am disturbed about her now."

"My Abie, he's disturbed, too." Reba Waldman scowled. "It is a difficult age, the age of youth. With our Susan it was always like this. So smart she was about so many things. But when it came to men, that was something else again. She is loving this Johnny Graves?"

The blue eyes of Miss Quinby flashed. "Why, I doubt that she even knows him!"

"Abie was saying that." Reba Waldman shook her head. "Then why? I'm asking you, Miss Quinby. Why?"

"Who knows," said the woman moodily, "who knows? She is out with him now, goodness knows where, although I expressly forbade her to go out with him. I tell you—"

She broke off. Excusing herself, she went out into the lobby and looked into the doleful gray eyes of Andy Beckett. Her anger with Wanda Ericson deepened. How dare the child use a man so shabbily, particularly so fine a man as young Andy Beckett who sincerely loved her and very genuinely wanted to marry her?

"Not in, ma'am?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Beckett. Nor has she telephoned when to expect her. I can say to you only what I told you before. She left early with Mr. Graves and I have not heard from her since."

He shook his head moodily, and ran a trembling hand through his shock of brown hair. "Womenfolk are critters I'll never understand," he said mournfully. "I reckon I just got her too mad at me. Yet before the night of the show we were getting along right fine. Why, you'd have thought—"

He left the rest unsaid. As Miss Quinby went back into her apartment to her guest, he turned and walked with shuffling step back to Mike Peattie in the glittering black roadster. "Reckon we were both wrong, fellow. Reckon I was just fooling myself all along."

"She told me she loved you. She asked me if I thought she should marry you." Michael Peattie started the car and headed it back to the white stuccoed house Helene and he had built on the lip of the brooding desert. "I think she was playing some kind of game with you, Andy, and with me."

The Texan scowled. "Does it make any difference? I sure can't stand around waiting for her the rest of my life. I got a letter from my folks. They need me at the ranch. This may be fun time here, but down in Texas it's getting to be calving time."

Michael Peattie sighed and went over the whole thing again, choosing his words with care. "She is under the impression, Andy, that one of these days I'll divorce Helene to marry her. I gave her the truth, but she refuses to accept the truth. Yet it is the truth, and there it is. Leave, and you lose her. Remain and you'll win her. She has a genuine fondness for you. That was on her face when she talked about you in the Canyon. As soon as she understands that the past is the past, she'll come to her senses and accept the happiness you're offering her. Then you'll be happy, Helene and I will be happy, and she herself will be happy. Don't you get it? Pride was outraged, a girl's flaming pride. She lost her man. She lost her man at an age when the loss put doubt of self into her mind. So here she is, not in love

with me actually, trying to prove to herself that she didn't really lose me, but that circumstances made it impossible for us to marry. But that is the thinking of a juvenile. Such thinking is unbecoming to her intelligence, and it will undergo a change. And if you're around to help, the process of change will be hastened. She will come to the conclusion that losing me was just one of those things. She will also come to the conclusion that . . ."

"You're a pole-cat, you know."

The epithet failed to ruffle Michael Peattie. He had called himself worse things many times since the marriage. "I know."

"You aren't even a man fit to associate with. You've cheated Wanda and you've cheated Helene and you've even cheated yourself."

"I've cheated no one. Marriage to a pauper would have been impossible. Wanda and I would have been at one another's throats within a year. As for the rest, Helene has gotten from the marriage what she hoped to get, as have I."

He turned the roadster into the grounds and parked it before the bright, red painted front door. He led Andy Beckett into the living room and kissed Helene on the nose. "Back from a tour of the wild, wild West," he grinned. "Miss us?"

"Not a bit. I was writing letters. I didn't even know, Monster, that you were gone."

The tone was soft, sure; the voice was happy. And Andy, watching a flush of pleasure come to her plump cheeks, began to wonder if Helene Peattie really had

been cheated of very much. Her manner was that of a woman rich in the possession of her husband. Her manner was that of a girl who had dug into the earth at the end of a rainbow and found her proverbial pot of gold. He sighed wistfully. He wished that Wanda would be waiting for him at home with that same look of pleasure on her face. Ah, the happiness they could have! Their own house and their children, their cattle on the range, their horses nickering in the corrals, and everywhere about them the space and beauty of the Lone Star State. He shivered. In this living room warm and happy with love, he felt an intruder. He took his watch from his pocket and glanced at it. "Maybe I'd better be moving along. That plane won't wait for me."

Quick sympathy came to Helene's eyes. She had always liked the broad-shouldered, big-boned man with his good humor and his gentleness. She had hoped for his sake that it had been just a misunderstanding on the part of Andy and Mike. "You really must leave, Andy?"

"The folks need me. And Wanda doesn't." His depression deepened. "Me, I was a fool to come. She couldn't see me for dust in the old days, and now she still can't see me for dust. Maybe I had it wrong all the time. And maybe all of us are wrong now. How do we know that she didn't know him in New York? How do we know that she hasn't been engaged to that fellow all along?"

Helene could have told him why *she* knew, but she held her tongue. She went to the door with the Texan and kissed his cheek. Then, troubled, she returned to the living room to discover that Michael had once again left her alone the moment he decently could. Her sense

of happiness disappeared. Anger stirred through her, and she went determinedly to the patio with its swimming pool and its lovely view of the desert. But he was not to be found there, either. Vexed, she sat down on a redwood chaise longue and studied the contours of the colorful desert, looking at the purple of verbena and the soft hues of primrose and the cactus standing in all shades of green under the great vault of the purple sky. She began to wonder about Michael again, began to believe there had really been a change from the moment he had learned that Wanda Ericson had come back. She wet her lips with the end of her tongue. What a far cry he was now from the man who had swept her off her feet over two years ago when Wanda had flown from Palm Springs without a word to anyone. She closed her eyes as a pang stabbed her heart. What a beautiful, beautiful courtship it had been. What sweet attendance he had danced on her. And in the soft, warm beauty of the desert night, what lovely words he had said to the woman who had fallen in love with him at first sight!

"Michael," she called, stirred by the memory, hungry for the beauty all over again. "Michael, please come here."

There was a long silence. Then a door creaked open, and in shorts and sandals and a gay T shirt he came across the patio. He glanced at the wind-ruffled surface of the pool. "Care for a swim?"

"Michael, don't you think it is time that we had a little chat?"

He understood, and smiled faintly. "Not about that. And I'll tell you something, Helene. Suspicion and

doubt do more to break up marriages than just about anything else. I married you because I loved you. I still love you. Beyond that, what else is there for me to say?"

Yet there was no conviction in the words. She remembered there hadn't been any conviction in words or kisses since the day Wanda Ericson had returned to Palm Springs to show clothes and fight her foolish fight. She wondered about something Wanda had said to her the afternoon Wanda had come to insist she serve as a model at the show. "In its own good time and in its own good way Fate will arrange it." She shivered with a premonition of impending doom. How sure of herself the girl had been!

"She is very lovely, Michael, isn't she? And she is still in love with you, isn't she? And it seems to me that your interest in her engagement to Mr. Graves is a rather pronounced one. Michael, do you know what some people would think if they saw you trying to help Andy Beckett? Some people would think that you are afraid of Mr. Graves and not of Andy. Some people would think you took the competition of Mr. Graves seriously, while you knew all along that Andy wasn't and can never be a real threat."

His blue eyes flashed. "A pretty thing, that, to say to your husband."

"I didn't say that I thought all that," she corrected him. Then, sighing, she took the step. "Naturally I am aware that you love me. And I am sure you will not read doubt of your love into the statement that we're going East for a while. My father wants us, and writes that he wants to do some fishing with you. And there

are some business matters for me to deal with."

"Leave Palm Springs?" He came indignantly to his feet. "But that's ridiculous! Why, my novel is just beginning to move. I couldn't think of leaving now."

She rose, and took another step along the course of action she had laid down in the quiet of the night while he had been snoring and dreaming his dreams. She said sharply: "I'm afraid that in this instance we shall have to forget your novel, Michael. I know that is a horrible thing to say, but it just isn't as important as the work I have to do in Boston."

He had repressed his feelings too long. For weeks he had lived in tension and in fear. For weeks he had been fighting the appeal of Wanda, the incredible beauty of Wanda. Now, suddenly, the scathing reference to his book was unpleasantness carried too far. "It most certainly is a horrible thing to say," he exclaimed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I admit that it doesn't make as much money for us as the Stryton cows do, but then I have never believed in the exploitation of dumb beasts anyway. I'm sorry. My writing happens to be very important to me. More important to me than your business interests. I have no intention of leaving until the weather becomes much too warm for work. There, you may write your father to that effect."

She went to the back door. There were tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat. Why had the wretched woman returned to destroy happiness? "Meaning, Michael, that you can't bear to leave her a second time?"

"Helene!"

She shook her head firmly. "No, Michael. You may

fool poor blind Andy, but you don't fool yourself, nor do you fool me. It is still there, isn't it? This, all this, was simply illusion, wasn't it?"

"Will you be sensible?"

She drew herself up stiffly. "The happiness went out of it, Michael, one afternoon in your office when I asked you a question you couldn't answer. Now I have another question. Until you have come to your senses will you please have the goodness to leave my house?"

He stared. But she had it all wrong. Of course he wished to remain married to her! She had money, didn't she, much money?

CHAPTER EIGHT

For an embarrassed girl riding across the desert, however, the news was news that she wished she hadn't made. She peered from the corner of her eyes at the man sitting easily and contentedly on the horse ambling along at her side. She wondered when he would broach the subject, when he would cut her to ribbons as she deserved. She also wondered if the flimsy excuse that she had lost her senses would have any effect whatsoever. She was inclined to doubt that it would. What a stern-looking man he was! He reminded her, in a way, of "Uncle" Marvin Stoddard, who had been the first "horse" she had ever ridden as a child. "Excuses," Uncle Marvin had once thundered, "are just words. They neither expunge the act from the record, nor do they make the act any more palatable to the person who was wronged." She looked up at the sun burning in the cloudless sky. She wished it would rain. She wished that *something* would happen to send them back to Palm Springs and people.

"I'm getting tired," she mumbled between dry lips "And thirsty. Why have we ridden out so far? And why have we ridden in this direction? I told you there was

nothing but hills and crumbling old mesas in this direction."

"I love the land," he said simply. "Whenever I find life becoming too hectic for me, I rent a horse and ride out to re-establish the bond I have with the land. Here's some advice for you. As long as you keep in touch with the land life can't really damage you. It's the people who forget they are of the earth who develop all sorts of nerve trouble. You might tuck that piece of advice into your brain for use when the occasion demands."

"You never loved the land." She wiped perspiration from her brow with the sleeve of her shirt. She remembered that Aimee, reluctant to let her use the company's clothes, had sternly warned her not to get so much as a speck of dust on them. She looked at the damp mark on her sleeve and the alkali which the hoofs of the horses had kicked up onto her jodhpurs. She scowled. "Aimee has told me a lot about you. She told me how you've always used the land to enrich yourself, buying it, destroying its natural beauty—all for purpose of gain."

"But it remains. And the oil taken from the land has enriched the nation as well as myself. Incidentally, I don't think much of Mr. Michael Peattie. A rather useless sort, I should say."

"Your opinion wasn't asked."

His green eyes twinkled. But he said nothing more. He gave his mount a tickle with the quirt and went racing off ahead of her toward a long, low mesa steaming in the heat haze. At the base of the red rock wall he halted his horse and jumped down to the ground. Then from the saddlebags he drew food and drink and led the

way to a pool of shade in under the lee of a lone butte. Overhead buzzards sailed on wide-stretched wings, and from one of the Joshua trees came the rattle of some insect. He indicated the warm earth with a wave of his hand. "Won't you sit down, Miss Ericson? I'm sorry the table isn't as elegant as a table should be, but I will vouch for the goodness of the food."

"I'm not at all hungry. I want to go back to Palm Springs. I want to explain to Aimee and to Miss Quinby. Drat it, I don't see why a scene should be made. I apologize. There. Now give me my paddling and let's get back to civilization."

"I have always loved the land," he said. His voice was a pleasant baritone. It touched the ear with music and did much to counteract the impression of hardness that his face, strong-featured and rugged, gave. "Perhaps that is because I grew up in the slums, the same slums Kitty Dolan grew up in? They say the human spirit always yearns for the thing it never knew. I don't know about that, but I do know that I have always loved the land and yearned for it."

"You're not to call her Kitty. She is now Aimee Reynaud. I admit it is a silly pretense, because she doesn't speak French and her manner is pure Erin. Still, that's her order and we should obey it."

"She'll always be Kitty to me." He peeled the wax paper wrapping from a big sandwich. He smiled. "Are you sure you don't want one of these? They're really very good."

Hunger made itself known in her stomach. "Well, I should insist upon a proper meal."

"Oh, I'll buy you many meals, Miss Ericson." His laughter rippled in the golden air. "As I should, of course, inasmuch as we are engaged."

"I want to explain that."

"Oh, I think I've put two and two together. The intention was to make Mr. Peattie jealous, wasn't it?"

"And to do the right thing about Andy Beckett. He was the long lean Texan you also met that night. You see, I had intended to use him as the decoy. But poor Andy, he's such a child in so many ways. He was very apt to believe I seriously intended to marry him. And that would have hurt him." She paused, remembering words her governess used to say to her. "It is wrong, don't you think, to hurt people?"

"Very wrong," he agreed. He smiled wryly. "How interesting to know that I am not so easily hurt. But there, I make interesting discoveries about myself every day of the week, Sundays included."

She took a sandwich from the packet and removed the paper. She bit into it with her strong white teeth and cried out with pleasure. Swallowing, she took another bite, a much larger bite. "Why, they're positively delicious."

"Always the best for me, Miss Ericson. The best land, the best date gardens, the best dress designers, the best models and the best food. I'm like that, you will find."

She flushed, sensing much more that was being left unsaid. Reaching out, she took a cup and unscrewed the tin cover from the thermos bottle. Pulling the big cork, she poured herself some tomato juice and drank it slowly, relishing the cool on her hot, dry throat. Overhead one

of the buzzards had dropped closer to land, a big, repulsive-looking bird that made her shiver. She glanced back at his strong-featured face. "Oh, I'm to see much more of you, Mr. Graves?"

"Why not? You aren't hard to look at, nor am I exactly as monstrous to the eye as yonder buzzard. And we are engaged, aren't we?"

"He has to be brought to his senses, you see. There. I give it to you straight. Aimee and Miss Quinby and quite a few others have the notion that I'm being very silly. They think Michael is beneath contempt, and they don't understand why I should feel about him as I do."

"Nor, for that matter, do I." He grimaced. "There are some things a fellow doesn't do. One of them is jilt a girl to marry a lady for her money. Another—"

But her hot brown eyes halted him. He was astonished to see just how much fury could be compressed into a single glance. Taking up the thermos bottle, he poured himself a cup of tomato juice. Now he grew aware of the intense heat and the shimmering heat waves radiating from the vast stretch of hot, arid land. He shook his red head. "But do go on. We are to be business associates, it seems, and one of my policies is to learn as much about my associates as I can."

"I am not being silly," she resumed, "because the fact happens to be that I love him. And you don't examine love as you do some specimen under a microscope, Mr. Graves. You either love or you don't love. If you do, then love is a fact that has to be accepted and dealt with as a fact. So I love him. I did the first time I met him, and I still do. And he does not love Helene. He admitted

that to me in the Canyon."

"Yet he did marry her, according to the information I have."

The answer came easily to her lips. Her heart had given it to her mind, and her mind had learned the oft-repeated lesson. "He married her because I left. In my anxiety for my father, I forgot about Michael. I was gone too long, and there were too many weeks without word from me. He assumed I had walked out, and his pride was hurt. He turned and found Helene waiting for him, and he did what a great many foolish, hurt men do. He married her."

He decided that his original opinion of her had been the correct one. She was indeed a rattle-brain. It was the old, eternal story of "beautiful but dumb." He marveled anew that Aimee liked her, that Aimee had insisted she be brought into the organization. Good heavens, entrust important work to a rattle brain? Repose all Aimee's hope for the future in hands such as these? He bit his lip and decided that Aimee wasn't nearly as intelligent as he had given her credit for being. "You ought to grow up," he said harshly.

She stole a look at him, and his expression bothered her. She looked down uncertainly at the little pile of sandwiches. She reached out to take another one, but suddenly discovered that she had lost her appetite. She wondered about herself as she sat there, the object of his scorn. Was she indeed as foolish, as idiotic as so many people seemed to think she was? But great day in the morning, what was a girl supposed to do if she was in love with a man who returned that love? Was she

supposed to run away from love? But running away was an act of cowardice. And it was an act of foolishness as well. The problem remained; and the problem would remain until it had been solved one way or another. She rose, stretching tired muscles. To the quiet man seated on the ground she murmured: "A person must play the game as he sees it, Mr. Graves. But I will admit that I have made an unfair use of you. Believe me, I don't very often do that. And naturally I shall see to it that the erroneous belief is corrected. Will a denial in the newspapers be enough?"

He stood up. "I don't like you, you know. There, I will say it bluntly because that is the sort of person I am. Aimee says, however, that you have very good points. She has told me in her letters, for instance, that you have a great respect for people, that you are far from being a snob, and that in your days of affluence you really did your best to help a great many people of the slums. So we'll let my dislike of you be forgotten. I just want you to understand that I think you are a consummate fool. Also, that I think you are hurting the woman in the picture without a single qualm."

"Helene? Why, she was my best friend! She had no right to betray me!"

"Assuming that Mr. Peattie actually believed that you had walked out on him, and I doubt he really believed that, then isn't it logical to think that Mrs. Peattie had the same impression that you think Michael Peattie had? I'm phrasing that badly, aren't I? But you do understand what I mean, don't you?"

"Helene knew me better. And she could have taken

the trouble to write."

"Rubbish. When you find an unexpected happiness you don't ask a great many questions. You take it gratefully; with prayers you thank your God."

She grew restless. She didn't understand why this was any business of his. She had offered to make amends, hadn't she? Wasn't that all that really mattered?

"I want to return to Palm Springs."

He nodded and very quickly helped her back into the saddle. He leaped up nimbly to the back of his own mount and led the way back in the general direction of the resort city. Then, with a smile, he gave her an insight into his mind, the driving, opportunistic man that had made him a very wealthy man at the age of thirty. "But as I have said, we'll forget my dislike of you. You have the connections, and I have an idea that with your help the business will prosper. It is agreeable to me that you be given a third interest in the business. All right?"

"I want no part of it. I did it to help Ainnee and myself. She has what she wants, and I'm on the way to getting what I want. A salary is all I care about."

"Still, you own a third. As for the rest, you will make no announcement to the newspapers. In the first place said announcement will make you look like a fool to Mr. Michael Peattie. In the second place, I find the engagement quite agreeable to me. It seems that accomplishment isn't quite enough to get me a membership in the Starry Sky Recreation Club. And it seems that I have a business need of such a membership. Tell me, will the respect of Mr. Borden for the Ericsons impel him to give me a membership now that I am engaged to you?"

She looked so confused that for a moment he actually felt sorry for her. But pity wasn't in his lexicon when business was involved. You met all sorts of moneyed people at the club. Such people could sometimes be used to advantage. For example, if he had five million dollars to work with right now there was an interesting piece of real-estate business he could transact across the border in Arizona. With luck the five million would net a return of at least fifty per cent. His share of that would be all net if he worked with the money of others. He shrugged. "It will be to your advantage, of course. You will have a suite at the Golden Desert, or at the Tru-ellen. There would be clothes, of course. And assuming that the interest of Mr. Peattie in you isn't merely a fancy of your imagination, it would certainly have the effect, now wouldn't it, of giving him a few real things to worry about?"

She swallowed. "And you get what?"

"Money. A lot of the members of the club are really rolling in wealth. And with you sponsoring me, and with a membership in my pocket, and my very good brains—"

"No."

He gave her another lesson in the art of getting one's own way. "Actually," he pointed out, "you have nothing to say in the matter. Choice? But, my poor, rattle-brained aristocrat, you have no choice. You refuse and I state that it was a hoax, and I give the reasons behind the hoax. You are made the butt of all jokes, an object of scorn. I am quite certain that a great many of your well-bred friends will cut you, and you'll end up where?"

Her lips twitched while her mouth went ashen. Then

with a furious arm she brought up her quirt and swung it viciously. "You filth. You cheap, conniving filth!"

He parried the blow with his own quirt. Riding up close, he wrenched her quirt from her hand and flung it down to the sand. His green eyes blazed. "You try that again, Miss Ericson, and I shall give you the paddling you deserve."

"The answer is no! Do you hear? You blackmailer, you."

He said nothing. A veteran of such engagements, he swung his horse off to the left toward the trail. "The Truellen, come to think of it, will do nicely for you. I'm sure there is a suite next to the Waldmans'. By the way, I didn't know you knew Abraham Waldman. Quite a nice fellow, isn't he?"

Color returned to her cheeks. "You know him?"

"A very good friend of mine. As a matter of fact, he once helped me out of a tight business fix. When the opportunity arose, I in turn helped him. I think he is one of the finest men on earth. For his part he is convinced that I am a scalawag. But I eat at his house, and sometimes we play poker, and in our separate ways we each seem to enjoy the other."

"About the scalawag part—he's right!"

He looked up imploringly at the curving blue sky. "Will you tell this fool," he cried to a buzzard, "that she gets what she wants, too?"

Her alert mind gripped that. "It is understood that the engagement may be broken when I wish?"

"When I have got what I came here to get, yes."

Another thought popped into her mind, and the

thought became a voiced question: "And whatever deals you'll offer to members of the club, my friends, will be honest ones?"

He took umbrage at this. "Miss Ericson, I have made a great deal of money. But honestly. Everything I have ever promoted was honest and paid off. Some of the deals may be risky, but when they are the possible returns justify the capital risk. Ask Abraham Waldman, if you doubt me. Incidentally, I am now worth a million dollars in cash. Does that prove I'm no fly-by-night?"

"I'll ask Mr. Waldman."

"My dear Miss Ericson, it is already settled. By the way, I'm called Johnny. And inasmuch as we're engaged, would you mind if I called you Spring? You are spring, you know, spring with its gold and its soft pink. At least that is what I thought when I saw you for the first time."

"I would slap your face, of course."

But now there was a twinkle in her eyes that belied her tone.

"Ah, well," he opined, "Wanda is a pretty name, too."

An hour later, to Miss Quinby's intense relief, Wanda Ericson, dusty and warm, stepped at last into the quiet lobby of the small hotel. "Where have you been?" demanded Miss Quinby. "Really, Wanda, have you lost your mind? All sorts of people have been telephoning all sorts of ridiculous congratulations. Why, even Mrs. Reba Waldman came here to wish you luck. I set her straight on the matter, of course, but—"

The girl kissed her working lips, silencing her. "Quinby," she announced, "it isn't such a beast of a world after all. As a matter of fact, it is a world that

gives you everything you want if you are just patient enough and resourceful enough. Incidentally, you should not have denied the engagement to Mrs. Waldman. You see, Quinby, Mr. John Wilbur Graves and I happen to be engaged."

"You are *what*?"

The girl yawned, feeling hot and tired and dirty. She gave her old governess a pat on the cheek. "It's a long story, dear, and I'm much too tired and thirsty to give it to you now. I'll tell you what. Dinner at eight. We'll go to the Truellen, where I am going to rent a suite, and I'll tell you all about everything."

The blue eyes of Miss Rachel Quinby flashed. "I think you have behaved abominably. I most certainly refuse to have dinner with you."

"Quinby!"

The woman marched stiffly to the counter. "You are not an Ericson. You are beneath contempt."

It was too much for a girl who had had a long and trying day. Like a pigtailed creature of old, she stamped her foot. "I won't be talked to that way, Quinby, I won't, I won't, I won't."

"Miss Aimee Reynaud, Miss Ericson, has gone to New York. There, does that tell you anything?"

"Tell me anything? But why should it, Quinby? Good grief . . ."

Miss Quinby shrugged her thin shoulders. "It happens, Miss Ericson, that Miss Reynaud is very much in love with Mr. Graves. There, in addition to making a spectacle of yourself here, you have shattered the happiness of your closest friend. I hope you are proud of your-

self. I hope you will have a good celebration."

Turning her back regally, Miss Rachel Quinby went back to her apartment for a cry. Little Goldilocks behaving in such an unseemly manner, Little Goldilocks who had always been such a good little child!



CHAPTER NINE

Aimee and Johnny?

Aimee in love with Johnny, and never telling a single soul about it?

Aimee dreaming of the day when she would be Mrs. Johnny Graves and mistress of John Wilbur Graves' residence?

"Incredible," said Wanda Ericson very firmly. "Utterly incredible. Aimee is a nice girl, but she was never in her life celebrated for her ability to keep her tongue *that* still in her mouth."

The stewardess paused in the aisle of the great transcontinental airplane. She looked down at the woman with the golden hair, and smiled brightly. "You said something, Miss Ericson?"

Blank eyes looked up at her. "I beg your pardon?"

The stewardess made a joke of it. "You must have a lot of money in the bank, Miss Ericson. You were talking to yourself."

But she was less polite about it when she stepped into the pilot's compartment up forward in the nose of the great, graceful airplane. She met the romantic eyes of First Officer Sean Kelly and shook her pretty little bru-

nette head. "The fruitcake in seat 24 is still mumbling to herself. Sean, do you think we ought to slug her before we land? A gal on the San Francisco run once had a fruitcake as baggage. And said fruitcake put up an awful fuss when they were coming in for a landing. One of the passengers had to help subdue her."

"Me lass," grinned Sean Kelly, "the evil ones will be gettin' you if you don't watch out." But ever the gallant gentleman, he poked his head out into the long passenger compartment and looked at the girl in seat 24. When he returned to his seat he was very indignant. "Jealousy does not become a colleen," he said firmly. "Whist, I'm sparkin' Blue Eyes in the future."

"Cut it," growled the captain at the controls. He peered through the plexiglass windshield and grunted as the buildings on crowded Manhattan Island came into view. "Home again. Home to the city of millions and little cubicles called home and to the fragrant odor of gasoline and garbage cans."

First Officer Kelly reached behind him and pressed the button firmly. Lights in the electric bulletin board out in the passenger compartment spelled out the words: *Fasten Safety Belts, Please*. Then, always one to play things safe, he looked at the face of his darling colleen. "You might make sure, Marge, that seat 24 does fasten her safety belt."

Seat 24, however, gave no more trouble to the stewardess. "How exciting to be home again," exclaimed seat 24. "Stewardess, I shall recommend this airline to all my friends. What a perfectly wonderful, wonderful ride."

The airplane roared in over the municipal airport. It banked and dipped lower and lower, and then wheels touched the frozen earth and the long flight from Los Angeles to New York had come to an end. People undid their safety belts and moved forward. There were the usual gasps when faces bronzed by California's warm sun found themselves suddenly exposed to New York's frigid weather, and a California youngster let out a whoop and fashioned a snowball the moment he had got down to the runway. A few minutes later the stewardess and Sean Kelly were able to relax over coffee and doughnuts, and ten minutes later the "fruitcake" was gone, too, wafted away toward the city in the company's glittering limousine.

An hour later she was having dinner with her father in the little brick house in Greenwich Village which he had managed to salvage from the wreck of his hopes.

"Nice trip?" He paused in the act of cutting his roast beef, a tall, thin, erect figure of a man with prematurely white hair and the traditional Ericson brown eyes. "You look tired. Perhaps you had better save the news for me until tomorrow."

"A nice trip." She glanced around the dining room at the massive furniture and the handsome old silver pieces on the sideboard. It seemed queer to be back in a land of ice and snow and bitter cold, seemed queer to see something more substantial than resort furniture. She smiled faintly. "You could go back with me, you know. As a matter of fact, a change might do you good. Dad, I feel sorry for people who cannot get away from New York in the winter time. Goodness, how very cold it is."

"I'll turn the thermostat up," sighed Maggie Washington. A heavy woman in creaking shoes, she went out into the living room to wrestle once more with the intricacies of modern contraptions. Her grumbling could be heard very plainly in the dining room: "Don't know why coal furnaces ain't good enough. Seems to me if it was good enough for the pioneers it should be good enough for us."

"Maggie and I," smiled Mr. Cranville Ericson, "are quite content here in New York. Incidentally, you must congratulate me. I am rapidly becoming an excellent chess player. Mr. DeWitt is no longer defeating me with monotonous regularity."

"Congratulations."

He nodded. Looking down at his plate, he remembered that he was hungry, and the rest of the meal was finished in silence.

But it was a silence that grew oppressive to him out in the living room at meal's end. In his happier days Cranville Ericson had liked a noisy house, and it galled him to sit in a quiet room before a fire with nothing better to do than remember the past. He clinked his coffee cup to the saucer and frowned. "Well, did you lose your tongue out in California? Or isn't there anything you can say in your own defense?" He nodded as she glanced up sharply. "Oh, yes, I know all about it. That toad Borden wrote me a long letter. He does not approve of Mr. Graves, and he felt it was his duty to an Ericson to give me his opinion of the man. In the opinion of Mr. Borden, Mr. Graves is a social climber, an opportunist, a cheap promoter. He is neither a man

of position nor a man of any particular intelligence. He further says . . ."

"Borden is a cheap snob. He's worse. He's a traitor to everything that this country stands for." She chuckled, remembering the way she had silenced Mr. Borden in his office one afternoon. "But I brought him up short once, Dad. He was all set to ease Helene Peattie out of the club. I foiled him, as the saying goes, and what is more, I made him take it."

"Don't you go running down Borden. He's all right. By thunder, at least he knows the meaning of the word loyalty. At least he has respect for something."

"For position?"

He held a hand up imperiously. "I will have none of your lectures, if you please. The social structure exists, and since it is a setup that works to my advantage, I shall continue to believe that it is a good one."

"Johnny Graves is all right. He drives a hard bargain, but he is generous if he is given what he wants. Come to think of it, you and Johnny have a great deal in common."

He snorted. "His cheap penny businesses! My dear Wanda, you give him an importance he doesn't deserve. Why, at my peak—"

"But you lost out, Dad. Johnny has never lost out."

"They did me in," he grunted. "I had their promise of support. But at the last minute they did me in."

"Or the inexorable balancing forces of nature, I'm afraid. It wasn't right that you should squeeze more money from the pockets of the working man, so you were laid low." Rising, she went to his chair and kissed

his flushed cheek. "Listen, I have to run and have a chat with Aimee. Then tomorrow evening I have to get back to Palm Springs. I'll talk to you tomorrow, all right?"

He blinked. "Aimee Reynaud is here in New York? But why? I thought the showing was a great success."

"It was. Dad, all sorts of orders are pouring in. Why, on the strength of those orders Johnny Graves should open a little shop. And who knows how big the business will grow! Dad, Aimee has a genuine talent. Now aren't you glad that you helped her in the long ago? You should be thinking of that, not of the unpleasant."

"As I recall it, I was bullied into helping her get an education. As I recall it, her training is something that she owes to you. You've had a falling out?"

"You might call it that." She walked across the patterned rug and picked her coat from the chair. "But it was silly, of course. Aimee completely misunderstood."

"Well, you can always get another designer. Actually, you are the backbone of the business. Your women friends will buy from you, of course. Are you getting fifty per cent? You should be."

"Dad, you're a born pirate."

His eyes flashed. "It shall happen that one day I will be on top of the heap. And then there will be some who will walk the plank. There, you have my word on that."

Her throat worked. Poor eagle, to have flown so high, to have dropped so low. Slipping into her coat, she hurried out into the night before the temptation to remain and comfort him grew overwhelming. Twenty minutes later she got out of the cab before the tenement building near the East River and walked up the long flights of

steps to the Dolan apartment. Knocking on the door, she waited until Aimee swung it open. Then, quickly, before Aimee could recover from her surprise, she stepped into the old living room. "Hello, idiot," she said softly. "Glad to see me?"

"You get out of here!"

Instead, Wanda took off her coat and sat down on a comfortable chair near one of the windows. It was pretty much the same room it had always been, with a cheap rug on the floor, cheap furniture strewn about the floor. Dan Dolan had been very firm about taking money from his daughter, who was beginning to rise in the world. "Every penny you earn belongs to you," he had said. "The old place is good enough for me, and I'll not take a penny to change it a bit." She wondered if Mr. Dolan had already left for work. She wondered if Mr. Dolan really knew just how brilliant his daughter was.

"I said get out," repeated Aimee Reynaud. Her hazel eyes flashed and her chin trembled. "Of all the cheap ingrates; I let you in on something good, and what do you do?"

The girl looked at the ring Johnny had slipped over her finger in Los Angeles. "Why, I become engaged to Johnny Graves, of course. And why not, Aimee? You certainly never let on that you were interested in him. How did I know that the preserve was closed?"

It was, thought Aimee, the point. Scowling, she sat down on the couch and looked moodily out the window. "Ever since I was a girl," she sighed. "Ever since I was a girl."

"Believe me, Aimee, I am sorry. If I had known I cer-

tainly would not have borrowed Johnny's so-called love."

"Borrowed?"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Aimee, just a little bit? How long have we known one another? Six or seven years, isn't it? I think I was fourteen when I met you at the settlement house for the first time. Six or seven years . . . I should think you would have gotten to know me better than that in all that time. Aimee, people have called me a great many things. Silly, for instance. But one thing no one has ever called me is variable. When I make up my mind about something, I seem to make it up for all time. Great day in the morning, I'm not playing at a game of love. You fool, I love Michael. I love him until he's a hurt in my heart. Aimee, I would scrub for him and cheat for him and steal for him, if need be. There. Can't you get that into your brain? He is all men to me. I don't even see the others!"

Comprehension gleamed in the hazel eyes. "You mean—"

"I mean, Aimee, that in very many respects I am my father's daughter. I can fight when I need to fight, and I can use all sorts of tricks when I need to use them. I lost Michael for a reason that was not my fault. Lost him to a very wealthy woman who was supposed to be my best friend. But I did not lose my love for Michael, nor did he lose his love for me. He told me that the day we were supposed to celebrate our good fortune. Remember? I walked out with no word to you, and you didn't speak to me for days. Well, there it was. What should I do about it? It seemed to me that pressure might help. As long as I was single, you see, Michael hadn't

really lost me. But if I were engaged, about to marry . . ."

"You're a child!" snapped Aimee Reynaud.

"Or perhaps I understood my Michael, Aimee, better than anyone else did. You might be interested to know that Helene is in Boston and that Michael is living in a motel now, in Palm Springs."

"You mean that an obvious trick like that worked?"

"Michael is a writer who deals in the obvious. And Johnny, you must agree, does present rather formidable opposition."

"Johnny knows?"

"He wants five million, does Johnny. He seems to believe that membership in the club will get him that much in the form of loans and the like. A bargain, for the two of us. He gets his chance at the five million, and I get my chance at Michael."

Aimee Reynaud went down the hall to the kitchen. She felt suddenly greatly in need of a steadying cup of hot coffee. She found herself wondering if the two of them had gone and lost their sanity. What happened, for example, when the people at the club found they had been taken in by a phoney romance? And what happened, for example, when Michael discovered he had been tricked? She went back into the living room, cups and percolator in her hand. She set the percolator down on the coffee table and pushed the electric plug into the wall socket. "I have decided to pull out of the firm, Wanda."

"I see."

"Not because of this, please understand. It's something deeper. Let me put it this way. You're not the girl

I used to know. That girl had common sense and a certain respect for herself. There were so many things that girl wouldn't do. For example, that girl would never have cold-bloodedly set about smashing a marriage. That girl had too much respect for the code, among other things."

"He loves me, not her."

"I won't argue with you, Wanda. It is a ridiculous belief that you have, but I'm too intelligent to butt my head against the stone wall of your refusal to see. The fact is that they are married and that he married her of his own free will. And another fact is that you aren't a good partner any longer. You see everything in terms of your blasted hopes, and everything is subordinated to your rather silly attempt to turn the clock back some two years and two months. You cannot turn the clock back, nor can you be an asset to the company if you cannot give the company your full attention. So why should I remain linked up with you? I don't especially like the girl you have become, and I don't especially like the idea of wasting my talent on a lost cause. Let me put it this way. When the engagement is broken so that you can marry Michael, people, important people, will know that they were taken in. They will resent that, and the resentment will be manifested by their refusal to buy clothes from the firm. All of which will leave me where?"

"With Johnny."

"Perhaps not. You see, I'm not like you. I can't put all my eggs in the basket of a romantic hope. Look around you, my pet. This is where I was born. Down there on the street I learned to walk and play. A wretched apartment, Wanda, a wretched street. I don't want to

end my days in such an apartment in such a street. You see? I've learned the hard way. Hope is a wonderful thing, but it does not put food into one's stomach."

"Or I could withdraw from the firm. There, that would leave you out of any attempt to lash back at me."

"Or you could announce that the belief held by many in Palm Springs is a belief not based upon fact."

The girl rose. "That would be impossible, of course. You see, Johnny would cry hoax and I would be made to look very silly. I cannot afford that."

"Johnny would do a thing like that? You're crazy!"

"So he told me."

The effect upon Aimee was instantaneous, and electric. She jumped to her feet and yanked the percolator plug from the socket. "Honey," she said crisply, "we're wasting our time. Do you know when the next plane leaves for Los Angeles?"

"In the morning will be soon enough." The girl hesitated, then kissed Aimee's freckled cheek. "If I had known . . ."

"We'll see what we shall see. And since it is Johnny's money, what difference will another trip or so across the continent make?"

Wanda went back to the brick house in Greenwich Village. Seeing her father sitting at chess with Mr. DeWitt, she smiled faintly at their colored housekeeper and tiptoed upstairs to her room for thought and for rest. Really, what a mountain Aimee had made of a molehill! No respect for herself? She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled. Why did people make such silly accusations? she wondered.

CHAPTER TEN

Despite the protests of their disappointed fathers the two ladies flew off for California the following evening. Like their fellow passengers, they exulted over the fact that they were leaving snow and bitter cold behind them. Like their fellow passengers, too, they grew excited when the great airliner pushed up through the masses of storm clouds to bring them within sight of the purple sky and myriads of blazing stars. For an hour they sat looking at the astral wonders of the universe, trying to pick out constellations and planets as the plane throbbed through the night. Then, becoming sleepy, they retired early to their berths. Half an hour later they were both asleep, untroubled by thoughts of the future and happily unaware that this night was destined to be one of the truly important nights of their lives.

But in Palm Springs it was only five o'clock. People were still swimming in the pools or playing golf or strolling about the city streets to work up a good appetite for dinner. Abraham Waldman was one of these people, and Johnny Graves was still another. Abraham Waldman had run out of paper and had waddled from the hotel to pay another of his visits to the little stationery

store on Thrace Avenue. Johnny Graves had run out of cigarettes and had left his hotel to buy a carton and to do some sight-seeing at one and the same time. The two met at the corner of Thrace and Vanetti, and promptly each forgot the piece of business that had brought him out into the waning sunlight. Abraham remembered some of the things Reba had told him after she had returned to the hotel from tea with Wanda Ericson's old governess. After the usual handshake he linked his arm through the arm of the younger man and led him down Vanetti to a little Italian shop where one could sip *café noir* and speak one's mind in an Old World atmosphere of peace and slow-moving time. He studied Johnny's freckled, strong-featured face as the waiter in the voluminous white apron brought their coffee to them. He was in a quandary. He did not wish to hurt young Johnny. Aside from his inordinate interest in success, the young man was a fine man, a giver to charity, a firm believer in the dignity of man. And Johnny had done him several good turns. Indeed, he sometimes doubted that without Johnny's help he would have become the controlling head of the studio. The young man had been quick to assist both with money and advice. It had been a business matter, of course: so much money in return for so much interest, so much advice in return for the assurance that the advice, if taken, would serve to protect his investment. But actually the loan had been made, the money had been given to him before so much as a single agreement had been written down on paper. The young man had simply looked him in the eye and intoned: "Naturally I trust you," and had written the

check for two hundred thousand dollars on the spot. Abraham Waldman couldn't forget that.

But on the other hand he couldn't quite forget something Reba had said to him the afternoon she'd gone to see Wanda Ericson, only to end up drinking tea, which she abhorred, with the girl's former governess. "Abie," she had cried, aghast, "this is madness." And he felt inclined to agree with that sentiment as he noted the strength of Johnny's chin and jaw, and the quality of hardness that shone in the young man's large green eyes. Johnny was good-natured and generous; when he believed in you he would do anything on earth for you. Yet always in the background of his mind, always in the dim recesses of his heart, was the thought of Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. Such a man simply had no love to give. All the love was directed toward Self. All life was seen in terms of its impact upon Self. It certainly was "madness," this engagement of Wanda Ericson to Johnny Graves. From it Johnny would get whatever it was that he wanted. But the girl . . . ! He sipped his steaming coffee and smacked his lips appreciatively. "They do things well in this shop," he said, speaking lightly. "Would you like to try some of the pastry?"

Came the grin, the flashing grin that told Abraham Waldman that discerning Johnny was onto him. "Never before dinner, sir. As a matter of fact, I have never particularly cared for sweets. I love meat. I could eat meat five times a day, and very often I do. I dare say that's because as a pauper I ate dozens of doughnuts a week and practically no meat. And if I were you, I wouldn't have any pastry, either. You know, it's foolish for a man

to let himself get so fat. The excess weight puts a strain on the heart. A doctor I know once told me that obesity almost always induces heart trouble."

"Sound as a boy," claimed Abraham Waldman. "You should have seen me one day at Palm Canyon. I went down the trail twice in a single afternoon. That was the afternoon, incidentally, that I met Wanda Ericson. Speaking of Miss Ericson, am I mistaken, or didn't you tell me on the afternoon of the show that you thought she was a rattle-brain?"

Johnny Graves' eyes twinkled. "That was because we had had a falling out. My fiancée, Mr. Waldman, has led me a pretty chase. There were times when I seriously doubted that she would ever really consider herself to be engaged to me. But she has come to her senses at last. Incidentally, I've engaged that suite next to yours for her. That is mostly business, of course. She has certainly delivered the goods. All of her friends want clothes—yes, and a great many persons have asked when we're going to open a shop. I think we will open up a place in New York. There really is profit in such a business if you get some connections with the big department stores. And you know how this society racket works. Wanda knows so many of the biggies, and so many of the biggies own stock in the large stores. A little influence, and there you are with a line for the masses on the racks. Want to invest some of your money?"

"Not on that basis. Too much depends, it would seem to me, on Miss Ericson. And Miss Ericson is such a confused young lady. I found her weeping for Michael Peattie, and now she is engaged to you. Who knows

when business will begin to bore such a rattle-brain? And should she withdraw, the business, as it is set up now, would suffer badly. No, I would prefer to invest in that real-estate deal you have on the fire in Arizona. That is something with a future. How strange! When I first came to California I passed through the desert, using that old plank road that now lies a twisted ruin on the sands en route to Yuma. Desert, desert, desert, endless desert. And now the Colorado River has been harnessed, now the All-American Canal is a reality, and now there are great patches of green on the desert, and now, inch by inch, wasteland is being put to man's use. An exciting thing, Johnny. America on the move again toward an interesting future. Yes, I think I would put fifty thousand into that new venture of yours. But as for the other—listen to me, Johnny. I wouldn't want to see Miss Ericson hurt. You understand that?"

"I think you're making a mountain out of a molehill, sir. I think you will discover that Miss Ericson can take care of herself. Don't let her fool you. The face is divine with its softness and pinkness and beauty. But the mind and the heart are a different matter. I think you will find that in the engagement two equals are united. I think you should worry about others. Michael Peattie, for example, and Helene Peattie. Wanda Ericson has tasted defeat. That gives her an advantage over Mrs. Peattie, I should say. Defeat injures, but it also helps. Defeat gives you experience. It also sharpens your wits, gives you something very real to work for. Put it another way. They say in the major leagues, for example, that a hungry player is always better than a rich, contented star."

The brown eyes of Abraham Waldman grew unhappy. "You will laugh, of course, but I do worry about the Peatties. As a matter of fact, the sadness of others always depresses me, in turn. I like people, you see, all people."

"I never laugh at you, Mr. Waldman. I think this would be a better world if each of us looked upon the other as fellow creatures rather than as competition, as checks, as inhibiting factors and the rest."

"Yet, understanding me, you can lend yourself to a ridiculous thing like this?" The face of Abraham Waldman grew baffled. "Johnny, you bewilder me."

"I shouldn't. Actually, I am consistent in my behavior and in my thinking. You see, the better world I was talking about just now does not exist. And I am a practical man who recognizes that fact. So I take care of myself."

"How can it be a better world when you refuse to do your part to make it one?"

Johnny looked at his watch and shrugged. "Crusaders don't eat meat four or five times a day, Mr. Waldman. I do."

The movie producer scowled as the young man walked toward the door on clicking leather heels, his head cocky, his manner brisk and sure. He began to believe that Johnny needed his help just as Wanda Ericson and the Peatties required the help of an older and more experienced person.

Stopping into the stationery shop on Thrace, he bought several pads of the ruled yellow paper he'd been using, and went back to his comfortable suite in the Truellen. He found that Reba had not yet returned from her

afternoon of Canasta, and thinking to utilize her absence to advantage, he turned on the desk lamp and sat down to do more work on his story about the Cahuilla Indians and beautiful, ancient Palm Canyon. But his mind refused to concern itself with plot and characterizations. His mind grew rebellious, as though it recognized that in fiction its owner was seeking escape from reality and a strong sense of duty. Presently, frustrated in his attempts, Abraham Waldman screwed the cap back onto his Waterman fountain pen and went to a chair at the window. His fleshy face a huge scowl, he contemplated the people passing to and fro on the opposite sidewalk, rich people, and people in modest circumstances, deliriously happy people, and people with drooping lips and nervous mannerisms. "Fellow passengers to the grave," he thought, remembering his Dickens, "and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." As such, a part of him. They made up the world he lived in, grew the food he ate, manufactured the clothes he wore and contributed in divers ways to his general comfort and happiness and well-being. They were with you always, as integral a thread in the fabric of the great design as you yourself, wrought of the same stuff, subject to the same needs, serving the same obscure purpose. To say or to think that the unhappiness of one did not in some dim way affect himself was to say and to think patent absurdity. Each was part of the other. The hunger of one became, by multiplication, the hunger of mankind. The good deeds of one became in their total effect the radiant hope of the world. A Hitler had ranted, and millions had been killed and wounded and impover-

ished. In the Panama Canal Zone some convicts had voluntarily exposed themselves to yellow fever, and now yellow fever was just about nonexistent. So it went, and so it would always be. The unhappiness of Wanda Ericson, the ambition of Johnny Graves had already begun to have their deleterious effects upon the world. The girl's tears had made him sad. The girl's attack upon marriage had already separated Michael Peattie from his wife. The ambition of Johnny Graves had already caused the golden-haired creature to abandon her principles. So it went, and so it would always be. Human thoughts and actions were as stones being dropped into a great sea. From the stones the ripples radiated, here to dislodge a granule of sand, there to moisten some plant dying for lack of irrigation. For good or ill unto the end of time, the thoughts and the actions had their effect. A man reached into his purse and helped a writer. The writer wrote books that served as inspiration to someone else. The someone else went on to accomplish great things which enriched the lives of thousands. And these thousands in their turn . . .

He frowned and turned away from the window. He felt suddenly ashamed of himself. No man working alone could cure all the ills of the world. But if each man worked to help those with whom he came in contact, if each man put his own shoulder to the wheel, couldn't truly wonderful things be brought about? Suppose the Peatties were to be reunited, suppose Wanda were to be helped back to firm ground, suppose Johnny's ambition were to be channeled into useful fields . . . four persons, yes, four small ripples on the vast ocean

of humanity, yes. But if those four ripples were put to a useful purpose, who could say what the total effect for good would be?

Or was he just an old, sentimental man growing drowsy in a chair and just thinking these things because he missed the presence of his wife and was trying to kill time until she returned from her afternoon of Canasta?

He sighed and rose and went into the bedroom to dress for dinner. He wondered whether he should have pheasant-chicken or roast beef, whether they should dine in state or in simplicity. And then up from his throat came the old words again. He looked at his fleshy face in the mirror, and to his lips came self contempt. "Despicable," he told himself firmly. "It was my business that afternoon on the dam of Palm Canyon, and it is my business now."

As a great airliner touched wheels to the airport in Cleveland, Ohio, he slipped into his jacket and again went out to the street. He was sure that Reba would not object to eating dinner alone, this once.

The ring on the doorbell roused Michael Peattie from a reverie he was having at the desk in the office of "Civilization's End." He knew better than to hope that Helene had come back from Boston to apologize and take up the old life with him again. And yet that hope was in the quick way he smoothed disheveled black locks into place on his head. Rushing into the bedroom, he took his jacket from the closet, and as their Filipino servant came out from the kitchen to answer the second ring he waved the small, white-jacketed man away from the door. Opening the door himself, he looked at the

tanned face of the fat man and knew a sharp twinge of disappointment. Then, remembering his manners, he stepped back from the door. "Won't you come in?" he asked, looking down at the caller's card. "Mr. Abraham Waldman." He broke into a doleful chuckle. "Yours is one of the studios that doesn't think my books would make good screen fare."

"Nothing personal in that, of course. We have a great many writers on our payroll, Mr. Peattie. Each of them is able to turn out a Grade B mystery that is suitable for our needs." The brown eyes of Abraham Waldman flicked about the room. He thought the rattan furniture with the colorful cushions was appropriate to the house and its surroundings. He was not as certain that he approved of the paintings on the cream-colored walls. Art, he felt, was not truly served by abstracts, the self-conscious efforts of painters to be different, clever. He felt that within the limitations of the classic forms was room enough for the expressible to be expressed. If art was a highly subjective thing, there were also aspects to it, he thought, that should be kept objective. But these sentiments he of course kept to himself. He had learned that arguments on such subjects could be long and tiresome, and he was in no mood to be distracted from his purpose. "Nice place you have here," he murmured, and sat down. "When I have retired from the business world I think my wife and I will become residents of Palm Springs, too. It strikes me as being a good place in which to live out the rest of one's years."

Michael had heard that before. So many of the winter people seemed to think that the weather now was the

weather Palm Springs enjoyed through the full year. "A few months from now," he said dryly, "the daytime temperature will be soaring to a hundred and twenty. Are you sure, Mr. Waldman, that you will be comfortable in such heat?"

"You don't say!"

The author smiled faintly, sitting down and crossing his legs. He glanced out the opened window at the flowers in the patio plantings. "But you were right about Palm Springs' living attractions. A man could do worse, much worse, than spend most of his life here. There is the desert, and there are the Indians. And of course all the world seems to come here in the winter time, and so there is excitement and variety, too."

It gave Abraham Waldman the opening wedge he had been seeking. He nodded dourly. "Perhaps even too much excitement, Mr. Peattie?"

Michael's brow knit into little lines. "I don't quite understand."

"The excitement, let us say, of the past returning more beautiful than ever. I will tell you something I've seen many lovely young ladies since I moved to Hollywood. But I don't think that I've seen any who were lovelier than Miss Ericson. I was speaking about Miss Ericson, you see."

Another hope flickered through Michael's mind. Helene knew all sorts of people. It wasn't at all implausible that Mr. Waldman was one of her friends entrusted with the mission of helping to effect a reconciliation. He lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke toward the screened, opened window. "In the summer,

of course, Mr. Waldman, air-conditioning rules the day around here. Are you a fan of air-conditioning? I'm not. But the fresh air is terribly warm, so we keep our windows closed and rely upon our air-conditioning unit. It makes the very warm weather tolerable."

He said with asperity: "I have no intention of being swerved from my purpose, young fellow. I happen to believe I have a duty to help. So help I will. Shall we return to the subject?"

The author chuckled. There was such deadly earnestness on the face of his caller that he felt abashed. His chuckle was an automatic reaction to that feeling. "What is the subject?" he demanded. "Am I talking to you, or to my wife, or to Wanda Ericson? Or do you come to satisfy your own curiosity? And am I justified in asking, if the last is the case, what business it is of yours?"

"It is my business. The world would be a happier place, young fellow, if everyone understood that unhappiness is everyone's business. But I won't go into all that now. The fact is that I think you and your wife and Wanda Ericson and John Graves are all behaving in a shameful way. You seem unable to make up your mind about marriage. Whether this marriage to your wife is right, whether marriage to Wanda Ericson would be more satisfying. Wanda Ericson, for her part, seems unable to decide between her principles, her respect for marriage, or her schoolgirl's yearning for the little crush of her youth. As for Johnny Graves, who happens to be a friend of mine, he seems to have come to the conclusion that anything he does to further his business interests is perfectly all right. So you hurt your wife and Miss

Ericson; in turn Miss Ericson hurts your wife and you and herself. As for Johnny Graves, he hurts everyone. Yes, the whole thing is shameful. I would suggest, then, that you tell your wife you want a divorce."

A gleam flashed in Michael Peattie's blue eyes. "Assuming that all this is your business, Mr. Waldman, and I'm not saying that it is, just how would that help the situation? Come, you see before you a sadly misunderstood man. I have repeatedly told Miss Ericson and my wife that I am content with things as they are. I have asked Miss Ericson to leave, I have even offered her money to do so. None of this is my fault. I made a decision over two years ago, and I see no reason to change that decision now. A divorce is not what I want, and a divorce is certainly not the thing I'll seek."

"An open break with your wife, you see, would have an interesting effect, Mr. Peattie. There a certain lady would stand in triumph, her battles won, her pride restored. It would give her confidence in herself. And don't you think it would also, when the first flush of victory had worn off, give her some food for thought? She might look at you and wonder. If you could marry and leave one woman, for example, how could she be positive you wouldn't repeat that procedure with her? Yes, it would have an interesting effect."

"A very bad Grade C motion-picture. As far as I am concerned, the thing to do is to sit tight. Helene will come to her senses. As for Wanda, that engagement to John Graves doesn't fool me in the least. Good heavens, but Wanda is a silly creature. Does she imagine I will become jealous? Does she imagine that I shall upset the arrangement I have now? Nonsense. I have what I

want. I have the world of pleasant things. Helene is a fine woman, my life is a fine life. No. The silly device will not work. And she will realize that, and she will stop being foolish, and she'll cease to trouble either of us."

"For you see," continued Abraham Waldman, "unless you do divorce your wife she will marry Johnny Graves."

Michael Peattie stared.

"He is very rich," continued the movie producer. "He can give her all the things she lost when her father suffered his business reverses. A woman could do worse than marry Johnny."

"Without love? Don't be ridiculous."

For the first time a smile lit the face of Abraham Waldman. He had heard all the stories about the Peatties, he had listened to all the gossip. "There are some," he said, studying one of the abstracts on the wall, "who don't believe that love is so important. Miss Ericson is one of them. But of course, if Johnny were to be flung aside in favor of you, and if he were gone, and the girl had come to her senses after you had become available . . . are you following me, Michael Peattie?"

Michael said nothing, but long after the motion-picture producer had gone his way he remained seated thoughtfully in the living room. Wanda would do a thing like that? The girl must be insane. It wasn't all happiness when you had married for money. A hundred times a day you had to conquer rising shame, a hundred times a day you had to look at a bankbook and say to yourself over and over again, "This makes everything worthwhile."

He had no appetite for the excellent dinner that

Manuel had made for him. Going outdoors, he sat down on the chaise longue and did some thinking. Wanda Ericson. A girl with a full heart who had given her love to him. And what had he done to that fine girl with whom he had spun golden dreams down in Palm Canyon? Why, he had made her into a horrible reflection of himself. She would know the shame, she would know the sickening doubt, she would know the contempt for self that often held you awake on your bed for hours and hours?

"Good Lord," he breathed, suddenly horrified. "Good Lord, what have I *done*?"

Across the continent swept the great airliner, and the two ladies slept on, sure of their futures, happily unaware that this night was one of the most important nights of their lives.

When the plane reached Los Angeles they hurried down to the solid earth and looked up at the clear blue sky and strong, golden sun. Then, smiling into one another's eyes, they made their way across the airport to the transfer car that would take them into the city.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They returned to discover that in their absence Johnny Graves had caused their things to be moved from Quinby's Rest to the Hotel Truellen. They returned, also, to be told that all sorts of messages had come for them from ladies interested in discussing their wardrobe problems with them. Miss Quinby, stern, austere, produced these messages from the little box behind her desk. Mrs. Stoddard, Miss Abercrombie, Miss Endicott, Miss Fuller . . . a good dozen names, and every name an important one to bankers and society writers throughout the country. The house that could boast of so exclusive a clientele was a house that would be justified in feeling that it had "arrived." But the reactions of the two ladies to this, their triumph, was hardly that which Miss Quinby had anticipated. "How nice," said Wanda, with dignity, and from the lips of Aimee Reynaud came no words at all. An astute woman, Miss Quinby wasted no time coming to the proper conclusion that quite suddenly the business enterprise had come to mean little to the two young people. She did not waste time, either, coming to the conclusion that the difference between them had not as yet been patched up. And anxious as always to protect

her Wanda from her folly, she almost spoke, to insist that the girl, at least, remain here at her hotel. Almost. As she met Wanda's hard brown eyes the words died in her throat. She remembered that in the past it had been sensible to give the girl her head. There had always been some things that Wanda had had to learn the painful way. She felt, studying the girl's face, that this was one of those things. She smiled faintly and shook her head as Wanda opened her handbag and drew out a sheaf of crisp ten-dollar bills. "Mr. Graves has already settled the bill, He insisted on paying me for the rest of the season, and I accepted. The rooms were rented for the season, weren't they?"

"You don't approve, do you, Miss Quinby?" The question came from Aimee Reynaud.

"At first I didn't. But Mr. Graves explained that very often it was necessary to spend money to make money, Miss Reynaud. And it isn't as though a man were paying your rent, is it? He is your partner, and he is the head of your organization. If he feels that it is to the interest of the firm to have the two of you living in an expensive suite, then why shouldn't you take advantage of a good opportunity? I have, by the way, told everyone who has called that you are now living at the Truellen. Everyone was so happy for the two of you. They feel it is nice to see the two of you getting ahead."

For Aimee it was more than just "nice." When they unpacked their bags in the suite at the Truellen, she got into negligee and slippers and prowled restlessly about their new home, testing the seats of all the chairs, looking under the rug to make certain the place had

been cleaned properly, and finally stretching out on her own bed in her own room. She shook her curly red head as her partner came in, dressed for the street. "Lush. Now this is what I used to dream about while I was sitting on a tenement roof, looking down at the East River. This makes all the work and study and sacrifice worthwhile."

"Just a beginning, darling." Affection for the girl caused Wanda to do a rare thing. Usually undemonstrative, she hurried across the floor and kissed the flushed, happy cheek. "You're so brilliant and good, Aimee. It's a combination that should get you to the top and keep you there for the rest of your life."

Aimee gave her a little push away. "Mush. Doggone it, why do you always have to go sentimental on me?"

"Maybe because I happen to like you. Or perhaps because I am basically a sentimental girl. Aimee, just see us now! And do you remember how you used to scold me in the old settlement-house days when I used to tell you that you could make all your dreams come true if you only worked hard enough?"

Aimee did remember. And lying there on the soft bed, with the golden sunshine slanting through the window to warm her body, she wondered if it hadn't been that memory that had impelled her to return to Palm Springs after she had left with the determination never to visit the resort city again. The settlement-house days, the days of study, but no doubt, the days of wishing, the days of nagging fear. Then a fourteen-year-old girl had stepped into the big hobby room one evening along with a great many other girls of Miss Fisher's

School for Young Ladies. And the fourteen-year-old, her blonde hair in pigtails, her brown eyes great and sweet, had stopped at the table and looked at the sketch she had been making. "Oh, how beautiful," the girl had said. "Golly, but you're really an artist, aren't you?"

Prepared to resent all rich young ladies who came into the big hobby room to stare at the poor, Aimee hadn't known what to say, and had sat there speechless, like a big bump on a log, until the girl had gone off with her friends. She hadn't ever expected to see the girl again. Then the girl had begun to drop into the settlement-house for a visit from time to time, always quiet, always smiling, always anxious to see more drawings of dresses and suits and coats. And one day, quite without knowing why, Aimee had found herself making up one of her designs for the little golden-haired creature who missed her governess and grew tired of waiting alone in a little brick house for her father to come home from his business day. From then on? She smiled, recalling the happiness that had come into her life. The girl had brought money with her the next time she had come and had refused to accept the dress as a gift because her father had explained to her that time and material and genius were worth money. Seventeen talking to fourteen, fourteen finding the older sister all lonely girls crave, and seventeen finding at last a person who believed in her.

Now here they were . . . angry with one another, about to end the friendship that had meant so much to the two of them. Aimee sat up on the bed, a ravishing figure in her negligee, her red hair warm and lustrous

in the sunshine. A smile spread across her wide, good-humored mouth, and up above snub nose a smile went to glow in her hazel eyes. "I was silly, you know, very silly. The truth of the matter is that I was jealous of you. Johnny, to give the wretch his due, has never given me a tumble. He told me a long time ago that he liked me but didn't love me. But it burned me up to see you getting what I thought I wanted so easily."

"It was a business arrangement forced upon me, as I told you. And it ends. It ends now, as a matter of fact." Turning, Wanda stepped out into the living-room. She looked at the modern blond furniture and the pearl gray rug and at the mirrors on two of the walls. She thought that lending her name to a deceit had been worthwhile if only because Aimee had at last been given the opportunity to know how nice it was to live luxuriously. And en route to the Hotel Golden Desert three blocks up Thrace Avenue, she came to the decision that Aimee would continue to live in the suite. There was every good reason for keeping Aimee there in the suite. She would need a place in which to display her clothes, wouldn't she? And when you were asking a woman to spend two or three hundred dollars for a single dress, you could hardly receive that woman in an inexpensive furnished room, could you? In the world of fashion a certain front was necessary. When people felt they were doing business with a prosperous designer, they were more often apt to believe they were doing business with a person who knew his profession. In the world, still, nothing succeeded like success. Johnny, she decided, would have to understand that. As for the rest!

The clerk on duty at the desk smiled faintly. "As a matter of fact, Miss Ericson, Mr. Graves just asked me a moment ago if there had been a message from you. He's out back, I believe, trying to master the art of playing croquet. Shall I have him paged?"

She shook her head, chuckling, and hurried on out back to see what a driving man of business looked like at play. But when she reached the croquet court under the trees she found the young redhead playing a very easygoing game with himself, setting up his balls very nicely before the wickets and driving them through at an angle that carried them well on their way to the wickets ahead. Unaware of her presence, he made a very beautiful shot, and the sound of her applause caused him to jump, as though startled. Which, in fact, he was. Johnny Graves gave his complete attention to all things. He had learned a long time ago that to do anything well you had to concentrate, and when he concentrated the world beyond him ceased to exist. He grinned sheepishly "You see, Wanda? That is what the absence of my fiancé has done to me. It has given me a severe case of nerves." He dropped his mallet and came over to the terrace, a vigorous, quick moving figure in white flannels and a yellow linen sport shirt. He halted and looked at her face. Then, as several ladies came out through the large opened door, he leaned forward and brushed her lips with his. "Have a nice trip, darling? It certainly didn't take you long to get back. We indeed live in an age of marvels."

"It was very nice." She walked to a bench under the trees and sat down. There in the shade, looking out at a

green and gold world, she knew a sensation of uncertainty. She shook her head. "You're a strange person, Mr. Graves."

"Johnny." He sat down beside her, resting a strong arm on the green back of the bench. "And I'm really not a strange person at all. As a matter of fact, I am the sort of person everyone should be. I know this is a mess of a world. I also know that it's a mess of a life if you don't take control of it at once and retain that control until God on high has decided that you've done enough living. Did Aimee come back with you, or do we have to look for another designer?"

The crisp tones astonished her, as did the expression in his hard green eyes. "Johnny, do you mean to sit there and say you actually *would* get another designer? After the way Aimee has worked? After the way Aimee has studied and dreamed?"

"Why not? I would hate to do it, of course, but business is business. I have an investment to protect, and if Aimee chooses not to work with us, then quite naturally I would have to get someone else."

Anger shot through her, but before she could make a fool of herself, anger was extinguished by cool logic. He was, of course, right. What else could he do if Aimee were to quit? As he had said, he did have an investment to protect. "Well, she came back. She was angry because of our engagement. It seems, Johnny, that she is in love with you and has always been. So I've told her the truth. Also, I've told her that I'm breaking the engagement."

"Are you?" He looked across the court at a butterfly

fluttering among the flowers of the side planting. "I think not. Things are moving, Wanda, my love. Mrs. Stoddard, no less, came over to me in the restaurant the afternoon before last to tell me I had become engaged to a very fine girl. She has invited me to her home, one of these evenings, for dinner. And Mr. Carruthers, a gentleman of the old school, stopped me on the street one day to invite me to play cribbage with him one evening at the club. Carruthers, of Carruthers Aluminum. Do you know him?"

"A very close friend of my mother's. As a matter of fact, he was a rival for my mother's hand. When Dad went to him for help at the time of the great deluge, Mr. Carruthers finally got his revenge. He was very stern with Dad. He told Dad, 'You are seeking to undo all the work right-minded people in this country have been doing for the last twenty-five years.' Mr. Carruthers feels very strongly on the subject of labor and management relations. He insists that it is possible for labor and management to work together as a team. He says that their interests are not diametrically opposed. He took my father's attempt to gain a monopoly very hard. As a matter of fact, I suspect that he was one of the shadowy figures in the background who finally tipped the scales against my father."

"It had to be, you know." Johnny Graves shrugged. "I don't want to sound as though I'm talking against your father. But his approach to business was the old-fashioned one, the wrong one. You can't build a sound country, a sound economic structure, if you underpay your workers, and plot to establish monopolies that op-

erate in restraint of trade and competition. It simply cannot be done. And you'll find there will always be a great many Carruthers around who will try to stop you when you seek to do such things. Big business-men are also Americans, you know."

"I know. As a matter of fact, I never approved, either. But I was here, with problems of my own, at the time. By the time I got wind of what was going on, several of Dad's supporters had pulled out without giving him notice and his house of cards had toppled."

"You'll make it all back if you stick to the firm. Oh, I don't mean you'll make millions. But you'll make enough to support you comfortably. I think this will be a good thing. It's too late in the season to open a shop here, of course. But Aimee can sell her originals and have them made up in Los Angeles. And she can make friends and you can make friends, and when we open a place in New York a couple of months from now we'll have a good talking-point when we seek to interest department store buyers and the like. One of these evenings you must draw up a list of all the people you know who can be influenced to speak a good word for us to store executives. You see? When you have talent and connections and money, it is almost inevitable that you will prosper."

She realized suddenly that they had wandered far afield. It was all very interesting, but they weren't discussing the important subject, were they? She stole a sidelong glance at his freckled, strong-featured face. She wondered if he hadn't deliberately led her astray. She was beginning to suspect that the wealth of John Wil-

bur Graves was no lucky accident. "Or you and Aimee will. I understand that the Peatties have separated."

"Your information is correct. The fellow has moved back to the big house, though. There, does that alarm you?"

It didn't, but his expression did disturb her. "You haven't much use for me, have you?"

The question surprised him. "But I thought I made that clear to you out on the desert. My dear girl, how could anyone who respects the institution of marriage have much respect for you? But that really isn't important, is it. Business brings one into contact with all sorts of people. In my time I've done business with some of the oddest people you have ever met. The fact that I had little personal regard for them didn't make the money I made with them at all obnoxious. And that is the purpose of business, isn't it, to make money?"

"I happen to have a very great respect for real marriages, Mr. Graves." Her lips forming a thin line, her back very straight, her body tense, she took the diamond engagement ring from her finger. "Too much respect for marriage and everything pertaining to marriage, in fact, to go on with a farce like this."

He ignored the ring. Again he looked at the butterfly fluttering willy-nilly about the colorful side plantings. "I wonder just how happy you would be if you were to marry Michael Peattie. I wonder if you wouldn't always be afraid that some day he would do the same thing to you that he is doing to Helene Peattie. That's the thing about all this that people like you never seem to understand. If marriage is to mean anything in this world,

then it should be for keeps. Get away from the idea of permanency and what happens to the home, which is supposed to be the bulwark of society? Once I watched the Mississippi River in flood. It rose higher and higher, nibbling at one of the levees. Now that levee was a strong levee, it had been built to endure, it lay along the river with an impressive air of permanency. Yet under the brassy sun the muddy river rose, and it found a little flaw in the levee and it chewed away at the flaw until the hour came when the whole thing was split asunder and the water spread out over the cultivated land and ruined crops worth thousands of dollars. This reminds me of that river in flood. There the marriage stands, with perhaps a little flaw in it. And like the river, you gnaw away at the fault and presently ruin the marriage. Cheapening your ideas of marriage, cheapening his ideas of marriage. Out of the wreckage comes what—a permanent love, a permanent home? Nope. Things don't work out that way. When matrimony galls, and there are times, I understand, when it does, one or the other of you will take the easy way out of the whole thing. And the battle you have fought will leave you where? I'll tell you. It will leave you with the thought that you have cheapened yourself and made yourself a fit object of contempt all for nothing."

"Don't you dare talk to me that way!"

"Put the ring back on your finger."

She leapt to her feet. "Don't you dare give me orders!"

"The arrangement stands. I find it suits my convenience." He rose, too, and shrugged, as though to dismiss further discussion. "I think I could beat you at a

game of croquet."

"What about Aimee?"

"She knows I don't love her. Will you play the red-striped ball, or the blue-striped ball?"

"I think you're despicable!"

"Oh, no, you don't. As a matter of fact, you have a grudging respect for me. I'm not a Michael Peattie who can be reduced to something less than manhood by the sight of you. And you have good instincts, as witness your disapproval of some of your father's business maneuvers. And those instincts approve of me. And you liked the kiss." He smiled. "Now let's play some croquet."

Before his hard green eyes she felt, suddenly, dreadfully confused and helpless. "As a matter of fact, I hated the kiss!"

But she played croquet with him, and had the satisfaction of giving him a sound trouncing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He came into their lives then in his typical energetic way. Their personal wardrobes were deemed by him to be unsuitable, and dresses and suits which had been made for display and sales were taken from boxes and wardrobe trunks and given to them for wear throughout the rest of the Palm Springs season. Into their local account he deposited several thousand dollars for promotion and good will. When Aimee protested that so far they hadn't even begun to recover some of the money already spent, he grinned crookedly and gave her hair a fierce rumpling. "Stop being a slums girl, Kitty Dolan. Did you think I had any expectation of recovering that money here? Rubbish. The value of Palm Springs to me, yes, and to you two, is this: Palm Springs is known throughout the length and breadth of the land. And the ladies and gentlemen who come here are, to a great extent, almost as well-known as this resort. Score a success here, as you certainly have done with your show, and prestige is automatically bestowed upon you. With that prestige and our wares, we can establish ourselves in the two markets we want, the mass market and the exclusive market. That is why you were sent here, and now that you have scored your success, that is why you

two ladies will be seen everywhere, mingling with the best people and selling them clothes even if you have to sell at a loss. When we go to New York two months hence you will have an impressive sales record, and an impressive list of testimonials. And the result will be that the two of you will take your first steps on the road to success."

His enthusiasm was contagious, and his belief in them was actually inspiring. Into the social swim the two young ladies plunged, participating in sports, attending dances and other functions, and leaving no stone unturned in their effort to win friends, influence people, and sell clothes to all persons who were deemed important enough to cater to and lose money to. At his insistence, they even gave a tea in the elegant suite which he, in his capacity as president of the firm, had rented for them. Again handsomely engraved cards were mailed to important personages over the signature of Wanda Ericson, and again kindly persons who knew exactly what use she was making of their friendship responded nobly. Even Mr. Borden attended, a man flushed with pleasure, a trembling, enormously happy man who had sat for almost two solid hours after his invitation had arrived, wondering if it would be presumptuous of him to attend the little function.

For Mr. Borden it had been a difficult decision. Back and forth he had paced in his little office in the club, trying to choose between self-gratification and his duty to his distinguished clientele. Inasmuch as John Wilbur Graves was simply one of the nouveaux riches, there was no respect and worship of position to come between him

and his good judgment. He saw very clearly the fine hand of John Wilbur Graves behind the invitation he had received. More than that, he saw with clarity the reasons that had impelled Mr. Graves to include him among the list of invited guests. And there was the rub. To accept the invitation, to accept the happiness of his dreams when he couldn't repay the kindness in the way that Mr. Graves hoped he would, or to stand firm in the interests of the club and the club's members? Presently when he found his thought-processes bogging down, he ventured out into the great lounge and made his way across the sober wall-to-wall carpeting to the chair of Mr. Carruthers. "I wonder," he asked, "if I might have a word with you, sir? I have a small problem that is giving me a great deal of trouble. I know I am being presumptuous, but still . . ."

"Sit down, Mr. Borden," said the great man crisply. Reaching into the breast-pocket of his jacket, he drew out a cigar. "Have a smoke? Excellent tobacco. From one of my own plantations in Virginia."

"I am signally honored, sir."

Mr. Carruthers read the invitation and scowled. He was a tall, spare gentleman with pleasant brown eyes, a neat mustache and a good head of brown hair. To the manor born, in control of himself, his business and his surroundings, he found it odd that the little elderly manager of the club should be in such a dither. "A poor investment, Mr. Borden? Or is it the other way around? Have you some extra capital you don't know what to do with?"

Mr. Borden reached into his pocket and drew out the

invitation which had come for him by messenger. "It is this, sir."

Mr. Carruthers read the invitation and scowled. "Wanda was always a strange little thing, wasn't she? By thunder, I should have been her father. Well, and what is the trouble? You have always been fond of her, haven't you?"

"Of Miss Ericson, yes. But of some of her friends, no." Mr. Borden wagged his head mournfully. "What a sad business it all was. And see what it has done to the child. She seems to have forgotten family and position. Mr. Graves is an opportunist, a man with nothing behind him."

"Except a million dollars, Mr. Borden."

A superior smile flitted under the gray mustache of Mr. Borden. "I was referring to the important things, sir, the countless important things that go into the making of a good society and a happy and dignified way of life. Things, sir, known to you and to me."

It made Mr. Carruthers uncomfortable. "You make too much of such things, Mr. Borden. For my part, I must say that a million in cold cash is a rather solid recommendation of any man's worth."

"I have been told, sir, that many gangsters have more than a million dollars in cash. Would you care to have them among the members of this club?"

It was, thought Mr. Carruthers, a rather well taken point. Certainly the club would be no place to sit of an afternoon if there were all sorts of riffraff about. "Frankly, Mr. Borden, I would withdraw from membership at once. But Mr. Graves is hardly a gangster."

"But I don't know about that, you see." Mr. Borden groped in the cabinets of his mind for exactly the right words and thoughts. "There, that sums up, I feel, my reason for placing such importance upon family and breeding. Good sound stock, sir, almost always produces the right sort of people, the sort of people you enjoy associating with. It is more than that, however, that goes into the making of the sort of people who join our club. There is the matter of training, the matter of special education, the matter of tradition. All this produces a kind of mind, a kind of approach, that one feels comfortable with. I do not belittle accomplishment as such. But a man who has made a million in a boiler factory, a man who has come up the hard way, is hardly the sort of man you could talk with for very long, or enjoy very long. In the club he would be an alien. You would feel uncomfortable with him, and he with you. No. I say, sir, let there be many societies. Let there be this society to which you belong. And let there be another society for the Mr. Graves of the world. You follow me, sir?"

Mr. Carruthers had not. He had been remembering Wanda's mother standing in a garden, one summer afternoon, with the purple of twilight falling about her to cloak her in a new beauty, a beauty that had put a lump into his throat and a tingle in his heart. He had been remembering the sweetness of her face, and the very genuine regret that had glowed in her grave eyes as she had told him that she was not in love with him. And the memory had awakened a long dormant pain in his heart. "Her mother," he said to Mr. Borden, "was such a fine woman. And how short a time she lived, Mr.

Borden It was as though the angels thought she was too beautiful for this mortal world and took her back to heaven where she belonged "

Mr Borden's face grew less severe "If you will for give the suggestion, sir, I would recommend that you close your mind to the past See, it is a beautiful day and you are alive and there is so very much to live for "

Mr Carruthers nodded "I daresay that way is best " He haunched several times, then returned the engraved invitation to the manager "You want to know whether to accept this or not? My advice is to accept "

'Mr Graves, you see, wants admission to membership That is behind this "

"He will get it anyway, won't he? Wanda will recommend him and since that is her attitude I will certainly help Irene's girl and recommend him myself And Rhoda Stoddard has always been silly about Wanda and there are the three sponsors I would say to you, Mr Borden 'What have you to lose? "

With pleasure Mr Borden promptly despatched a note of acceptance to Miss Ericson, and at the appointed hour he had promptly rung the bell of the suite And now with the others he sat in the lovely sitting room, drinking Japanese Green, munching on tasty morsels of French pastry and enjoying himself hugely as the guests came in to fill the chamber with their persons and the air with the good noise of their laughter and conversation He was not a bit astonished when a very kind Rhoda Stoddard insisted that Wanda exhibit more of the clothes designed by Aimee Reynaud Moving to the back of the room as several of the hotel employees ar

rived to transform the place into a little show-room, he met the twinkling green eyes of Johnny Graves and inclined his head. "You do things very well, Mr. Graves. It would not surprise me in the least to see Miss Ericson recoup some of her lost fortune."

"Oh, she will be very wealthy one of these days, Mr. Borden." As the showing began, Johnny led the man out to the terrace overlooking the back streets of Palm Springs. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Naturally. It isn't often that I have the opportunity to attend such a function. Such distinguished people, Mr. Graves. I have come a long way. I began life on a small farm in Kansas. Now here I am drinking tea with the elite. What more could a person ask of life?"

It was a point of view that Johnny couldn't understand. "All this stuff about position really means something to you, doesn't it?"

"It does."

"Most of it is sham, yet to you it isn't at all."

"I do not believe it is sham. They set the standards, they are the gauge by which men and women may measure themselves."

"Yet an idiot might be born into a society family. Would you call the idiot a good standard?"

"There are always exceptions, Mr. Graves. But by and large it is a social structure that serves its purpose well. The world, in my opinion, is better off with it. The thoroughbred, be it horse or human, is never a creature to take lightly. It has heart and stamina and intelligence. In nine cases out of ten it will win the race. That is a percentage, it seems to me, that lends strength

to my position in the matter."

"Me, I'm always intrigued by the exception, Mr. Borden. I shall tell you how I have made my money. I have made it by concentrating upon the exceptions. I have worked with land ignored, opportunity overlooked by others. You see?"

Mr. Borden, finding his cup empty, set it down on the retaining wall of the terrace. He heard chatter and laughter behind him and he longed to get back into the presence of the great. But there was still a little matter here to settle. "I never overlook the exceptions if I possibly can, Mr. Graves. It would seem that you have found favor in the eyes of Miss Ericson. It would also seem that you have found favor in the eyes of Mr. Carruthers of Carruthers Aluminum. It would also seem that eventually you will find favor in the eyes of Mrs. Stoddard of Stoddard's Borax. Thus you will be nominated for membership in the club. And I assure you, all these things considered, that I will deem it an honor to number your name amongst the names of my gracious patrons. Whether you approve of the standard or do not, Mr. Graves, you are now a member of this little group. May I felicitate you, sir? It is not given to many to take such a long step upward so quickly."

Spoken as Mr. Borden spoke it, it was an impressive little speech. It did something to Johnny Graves. He felt suddenly as though he had been elevated to a great seat of power and position. His mouth clicked shut, and his hands tightened at his sides. And the quick eyes of Mr. Borden behind his eyeglasses did not miss these little tell-tale signs. He smiled wryly, picking cup and

saucer from the retaining wall of the little city, he inhaled deeply. "You see, Mr. Graves, there is more to it than you thought. A moment ago you were scornful. Then you are accepted by them and your attitude changes. So it will always be. They are the best. Down through the centuries their families in the main have been acknowledged the best, therefore it is so. It is a fact, a fact like the rising sun or the waning moon. May I take this opportunity to say, sir, that being numbered among the best will awaken you to social responsibility and put unworthy thoughts and actions from your mind and muscles? May I say, sir . . ."

There was an interruption. Behind them the terrace doors opened and Michael Peattie, thickset, pale, his blue eyes flashing, came striding out to them. "Hello, Borden," he said coolly. Then, turning to Johnny Graves, he thrust out his hand. "I'm Michael Peattie, Graves. Wanda told me you were out here."

Sensing unpleasantness, Mr. Borden withdrew hurriedly, leaving the two men to themselves.

"Hello, Peattie." Ignoring the outstretched hand, Johnny Graves made himself comfortable on a lounge chair. "What can I do for you?"

"Kick me in the seat of my trousers." His lips working, the author actually turned his back to Johnny Graves and bent over into the approved position. "I have it coming to me."

"I never do violence to anyone. Once, as a kid, I had a fight with another shine boy who wanted to muscle into my territory. His head struck the curb and he was knocked cold. It struck me then that violence was the

beast's way of settling differences, so I haven't fought with anyone since then. Sit down. Had some tea? It is really pretty good, although I prefer coffee."

Michael Peattie dropped into a chair. There had been many more hours of thought since the evening Mr. Waldman had awakened him to the great wrong he had done. Now there was more thought, but thought of a different nature. "Glad to hear you say that," he smiled "You see, I have come to my senses, it seems. The whole thing was idiotic, of course. It was base, as well. I shall tell you frankly that I am not proud of myself. Poor Helene. Yes, and poor Wanda. So much hurt, and all because I thought it would be agreeable to live in the pleasant, well ordered world of the rich."

Johnny's muscles sprang into a state of tension. "Meaning you intend to correct the wrong?"

"If she wants me. You know, I have never denied to her that I love her. Nor have I ever denied it to myself."

Johnny Graves looked away from the man, looked off at the sky, at the first flush of the sunset's red. And now a little fear shivered through him and he wished that he did not have an aversion to settling his differences with people in a violent way. "You will leave Palm Springs at once, Peattie. If your wife neglected to leave you some funds, I'll send a check to your house. But in any case, you will leave at once."

The chair scraped as Michael Peattie rose. From the lips of the Englishman who had abandoned his country years ago came a little chuckle. "And if I refuse?"

"You will leave." Johnny came to his feet. "Your

presence here has suddenly become inconvenient to me. I tolerated your presence in this town because it seemed to me that you would behave in a sensible and decent way. Now you are in affront to my eyes, a stench in my nostrils. I will not permit you to make Miss Ericson unhappy for a second time, nor will I permit you to do further injury to your wife. I trust that is clear?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" Michael Peattie turned his back on furious Johnny Graves and took a little step toward the door. He gave a little chuckle . . . then the chuckle became a gasp, a growl of sheer animal fury. Fighting the hand that had suddenly gripped him by the collar, he found himself made utterly helpless for the first time in his life. There was no fuss, no noise. Throttled effectively by the tautness of the collar about his neck, he was half dragged and half pushed along the terrace to the flight of stairs leading down to the side lawn. A push sent him stumbling to the grass, and as he rose to his knees a strong foot was raised and Johnny Graves' shoe came to a halt an inch from his nose. "I could cave in your face, Mr. Peattie," said the redhead. "It is a trick I learned in the slums of New York."

"See here, now, what business is it of yours? Do you think that engagement has misled me for an instant?"

"No intention of misleading anyone was in my mind, Peattie. But it suits me to be engaged to Miss Ericson, and there the matter will rest." Turning, he went back up to the terrace, and found Mr. Borden smiling at him.

"Well done," said Mr. Borden, with dignity. "Very well done, sir." Reaching up with trembling hands, he straightened the knot of Johnny's necktie. Then his eyes

twinkled. "But tell me, sir, are you certain you haven't misled yourself? Perhaps this engagement . . ."

"Nonsense," snapped Johnny. His eyes frosty, he turned and went back into the living-room to rejoin society at tea.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His work went very badly for Michael after that. Every time Manuel, the Peatties' Filipino servant looked into the office, he found his master seated as in a trance at his desk, his hands immobile on his lap, his face blank of expression and almost of life. The trouble, as Michael himself saw it, was that his mind was distracted by too many thoughts really to concern itself with the taut tale of suspense he was trying to write. After ten days of fruitless effort he gave a shout and carried his portable typewriter out into the patio and dropped it without ceremony into the pool. He hurried through the lunch that the troubled Manuel served him, then went out into the living-room and picked up the telephone. He dialed the number of the Hotel Truellen and firmly asked for Wanda. This time he refused to be put off by the frigid voice of her partner, Aimee Reynaud. "I will see her," he said sturdily, "if I have to sit before her door for a month. Now, then, will you be an adult, or won't you?"

Aimee apparently decided that he would make his threat good. There was a long silence, and then a breathless voice came through the receiver: "Michael?

But how nice! I've been wondering when I would see you."

The quality of warmth in her voice gave him confidence. He made a date with her and hung up to dress. Meeting the quiet eyes of his servant, he gave a nervous shrug of his shoulders. "In the event my wife should come back, Michael, which I doubt, tell her I'll be home in an hour or so, won't you?"

His pulse quick, he dressed and drove hurriedly out to Palm Canyon, to the little retreat they had found in the long ago. To his intense pleasure he found that this time Wanda had arrived first, a Wanda pert and lovely to the eye in a pair of plaid shorts and a saucy little yellow T shirt. Every visible inch of her was brown and young and beautiful. Her eyes, great brown pools with fleck of gold in their depths, were like a refuge, too, into which he could go and lose all the doubts and fears that had assailed him after he'd had his talk with Mr. Abraham Waldman. Thinking of the motion-picture producer, he smiled. "You have some interesting friends," he told her. "Some of them are very likable, too. Mr. Abraham Waldman, for one. He came to Civilization's End one evening when you were in New York and we had a most interesting chat. This place is like him in a way, isn't it? He stands like a tower of strength, just like these justly famed palms. And there is dignity and good cheer and fellowship in him, and a kind of pristine beauty that makes you think of the stream over there sparkling in the clean sunlight."

She clapped a small hand to her forehead. "Goodness, I have still to meet his wife. Michael, he'll never

forgive me!"

"Oh, I think he will. I doubt that any man alive could look at you, Wanda, and not forgive you worse crimes than that. You are a benison to the eye. I look at you and all sorts of memories come into my mind, memories of the Taj Mahal in India, memories of the wild hyacinths and scarlet anemones of old Provence, memories of all the beauty I have seen and hope to see. You are, in short, quite a comely girl, the sort no man can ignore, the sort almost all men can love."

She nodded. She had heard the speech from his lips before, yet it was an agreeable one, one that titillated her vanity. She sat down on a log and looked toward the stream. She had a schoolgirl's desire to bathe her feet in the cold, running water, but sensing that now was hardly the time for schoolgirl behavior, she very carefully looked back at his earnest, handsome face. She felt intuitively that she had come once again to a crossroads in her life. She had heard from Mr. Borden about the short scuffle between the two men, and she had learned that in his opinion the businessman was an infinitely more worthy gentleman than the writer. 'And more interested,' Mr. Borden had added with a flash of his eyes, 'much more interested, I have no doubt.' It had been a rather surprising thing to be told. It had been difficult to believe. But she had since come to the conclusion that to Johnny the engagement wasn't nearly as much as a business arrangement as he seemed to believe it was. Ten days of dinners and dancing, ten days of golf and swimming and business talks and rides across the desert on the backs of uncomplaining horses. Ten

days of excitement and fun and of a happiness she had not known since the dreary morning in New York when she had received Michael's dream-shattering telegram. Ten days, she thought, of getting to know Johnny Graves rather well. She smiled wryly. Once again a trap had closed upon its maker, once again a man had proved himself to be much less clever than he had thought.

"Have you heard from Helene?" She glanced at the old palms, remembering some of the things Johnny had said about girls who tried to break up marriages. "Is she coming back to Palm Springs to finish out the season?"

"I doubt it. As a matter of fact, I doubt that she'll be coming back at all. She kicked me out, if you want the plain truth. She doubted my love for her, and she left."

It took the girl aback. She had thought it had been the other way around. She had thought that Michael had come to his senses at last. She looked away from his troubled blue eyes and wondered if he ever would find the strength to make a clean break. She felt, for an instant, rather sorry for him. She had never had any doubts as to her own feelings. She found it pathetic that he should be torn between the love he had for her, and the dictates of a pride that would not permit him to admit he had been hurt and had done a dreadful thing before he had returned to his senses. "You owe her nothing," she said sharply. "You owe her nothing at all."

He came nearer, sitting down beside her, at last. Then through the sunlight his hand moved to close warmly about hers. "And I owe you so much?" His tones were strange. After a pause he answered his own question. "Yes, I imagine I do. We have a duty, don't

we, to those we have almost destroyed? I think of the dreams shattered, the hearts all but broken. And do you know what I suspect . . ."

"Michael!"

How hostile her face was, suddenly. What fury flared there in eyes which only a few seconds ago had been as serene pools of brown in the sunshine! He flushed and kissed the palm of her hand tenderly.

"Duty?" She snatched her hand away, irate. She sprang nimbly to her feet and stood there, clean-lined and young, vibrant with the full surging anger of the young. "You talk to me of duty? You have the effrontery to try to put it on that basis? You should be ashamed of yourself. You lack courage, Michael Peattie. You lack the courage to concede that because you were hurt you made a dreadful mistake."

He felt a curious pang. It disturbed him to look at her, an otherwise sensible girl, and know that up to a point she could see with startling clarity and that beyond that particular point her vision was blurred by emotion's mist. He wanted to tell her a few plain truths about herself and her capacity to think. He wanted to break through the wall of unhappiness that had surrounded him for days and blast those walls to smithereens for all time. But he held his tongue still in his mouth. He had not come to hurt anew, but to help. Better that he should lose out, when you came right down to it, than that she should know the same shame he had felt so often since the day he had stood beside Helene in church and been united to her in marriage. He scratched his ear. "Yes," he said, after a long sigh,

"I suppose that was my trouble all along. I suppose my pride wouldn't allow me to confess that your flight and your silence wounded it, that hurt pride sent me to the arms of another woman. How horrible it is to have such a pride. How ghastly. I love you, Wanda. I did in the beginning, and during these years the love has grown. Now? Well, there will be a divorce. And presently, if you want me . . ."

"That's better," she interrupted. And now happiness glowed on her face again, and she laughed softly in her throat, made warm and tingling by her happiness. She took several quick steps forward, eager for his kisses, the sense of belonging to someone again, the sense that life had a rich meaning for herself and all the other young ladies of the world. She said imperatively, "Kiss me, Michael. Oh, darling, how I long for your kisses."

Did it matter? he wondered. He had lost the loot, he might as well have the game. Rising, he took her into his arms. Gently he kissed her forehead, gently he kissed the tip of her nose. "You are life and happiness," he intoned. "You are the flowers of old Provence, and you are—" He broke off as impatient lips found his mouth.

His arms tightened about her. He wondered how they would pay the expenses, he wondered how he could possibly manage without a servant. And to have to make old clothes do, to have to be careful always to buy the cheapest cuts of meat, the cheapest typewriter ribbons and paper. To live that way perhaps forever! The thought nauseated him. He wondered about the sort of flat they would have—then thought stopped, froze in the tubes of his mind as she drew herself from his arms

and became a red-faced Termagant there before his eyes. He fell back a step as a voice screamed horrible things at him, as fingernails clawed at his cheeks, clawed for his very eyes.

"Filth!" she stormed. "Filth, filth, filth! It's all a lie. It's all a cheap lie!"

"Wanda, listen to me. . . ."

"From the very beginning it was a lie. You loved me? Why, you beast, you despicable filthy beast. It was *my* money, wasn't it, and after I lost mine it was Helene's money, wasn't it?"

His face bloodless, he stepped forward to shake her from her tantrum. And then there came a little chuckle from the trail, and Helene appeared in a purple woollen suit, a saucy hat on her head. "My husband," she said in a voice of irony. "Behold my beautiful husband who knows all the right words to say to all ladies of money."

Head slung low, he looked about like a wounded animal as though for some means of escape. But there was no escape. There were four eyes glaring at him, there were the two red faces of two angry women turned toward him, waiting for him to say something. He fell back another step, wondering why in the name of heaven he had listened to Abraham Waldman for an instant. "You won't believe this," he said to his wife, "but I was trying to make her understand she had lost nothing."

"I most certainly have not!"

He had found a way!

By the eternal, he had actually found a way!

The good old mind, the good old plot-constructing

mind of an author had at last found a way.

"It had to end," he said to his wife with more strength in his tones. "It meant unhappiness for all of us, so it had to end. And what better way to end it than prove to her that I never was what she thought I was? She is a woman of principle, you see. How could she do aught but despise a fellow who held marriage in such contempt? Do you see, Helene, my love, my dearest, dearest love?"

There was a snort from a girl with golden hair and big brown eyes, the kind of snort Mr. Borden had always associated not with aristocrats but with plebeians. "I leave you," said Wanda Ericson, "to your mess, Helene."

"Oh, we must ride back to Palm Springs together, Wanda." Helene stepped forward along the trail and linked her arm through the arm of the younger woman.

"Helene," roared a confused, angry male. "Helene, will you listen to me?"

She halted and turned to face him. "Michael, I was very much impressed by your little speech to Miss Wanda Ericson. I particularly liked those lines about the Taj Mahal and the wild flowers of old Provence. As a matter of fact, I particularly enjoyed them the night you said them to me. You remember the night, don't you? That was the night we became engaged after an exciting month of courtship."

"It had to end," he said insistently. "It had to end."

She shrugged. "As a matter of fact, my husband, it has. In Boston I had a long chat with my father, and he showed me how to arrange things in such a way as to make it impossible for you to get at my capital. So it has

indeed ended. There will not, of course, be a divorce. I don't happen to approve of them for religious reasons. On the other hand, it would certainly be a sin to lend myself to a marriage of convenience, wouldn't it? I think it would be. So I have arranged for a legal separation."

"Helene, you fool, you blind fool!"

She said nothing more. Rejoining Wanda Ericson up ahead on the trail, she walked briskly to the top of the dam. A few minutes later he heard the sound of Wanda's car. Not hearing the sound of a second car, he grew excited with hope. He rushed up the trail to the escarpment. Then hope ebbed. He met the glance of their Scot chauffeur and grimaced. "Hello, McTavish. I daresay you had better drive home, too."

"In good time, laddie. But the mistress has asked me to help you move your things from the house. Is that your pleasure, sir?"

I'll smash her, thought Michael Peattie. As God is my witness, I'll smash her.

To his horror, however, he discovered a few days later that Helene's father had managed her financial affairs very nicely. There was not a dime left in their mutual accounts; there was not so much as a farthing with which to fight.

In a storm of fury, he remembered the man who had come to Civilization's End one evening to chat with him. Waldman's fault, the fault of the fat man! And now, distraught, frightened for the first time in his life, he hurried to the Hotel Truellen and pounded his fist on the door of the Waldman suite. Glaring at the thin,

dark-haired woman who opened it hurriedly, he demanded, in a voice of thunder, to see her husband.

All of which amused Reba Waldman. Her dark eyes twinkled as she threw up her hands. "Such bad manners. And look, a hat on his head yet. This is proper deportment, Mr. Peattie? Your mother would be ashamed of you."

He took his hat off, abashed, and made a prodigious effort to control himself as he stepped into the living-room. "Sorry. Please accept my apology, Mrs. Waldman. I was distraught."

"So you're forgiven." She shook his limp hand with ceremony. "I'm always telling people that if they will admit their faults and apologize they have good hearts. But is this the way to thank my husband? Or are you such an artist, Mr. Peattie, that you cannot earn good honest money with your work?"

"*Thank him?*"

Reba Waldman held up her hand and gripped her first finger. "First, the story director is against you. No class, he tells my Abie, no class. Then the directors are against you. No sense of plot, they're telling my Abie; everything is hackneyed. Such a word! But is my Abie retreating? He has a story, my Abie does. And he wants Michael Peattie who understands the desert, the Indians, to write this story. So after shouting and name-calling, my Abie has them put you onto the payroll. And this is not a thank you, I'm thinking."

He sat down. He had a horrible notion that if he didn't sit down promptly his legs would buckle and throw him hard to the floor.

When he had recovered his strength and had thanked Mrs. Waldman properly, he hurried down the hall to the next suite. Ringing the bell, he kept his finger pressed to the button until the door had been opened. This time he was careful to remember his manners. "Hello, Miss Reynaud; is Wanda in?"

"No." She hesitated, then felt sorry for the man with the wan face and the dull blue eyes. She opened the door wider to him and smiled pleasantly. "I'm working, but if you'd like to, you're certainly welcome to watch."

He stepped inside and closed the door softly behind him. He was surprised. "You aren't afraid you'll be contaminated by the likes of me?"

"We all make mistakes. Understanding, Michael, is one thing that life in the slums teaches you. I knew a murderer once. I used to play checkers with him in the park and we used to have a lot of laughs together. When he learned that my mother was dying he dipped into his bank account and hired a specialist in cancer. But Mother died and this murderer was very much upset. A few days later he was arrested and his past became public knowledge. He had once killed an old lady for the contents of her pocketbook. You see? The good and the bad in the best of us. The man was properly punished for his crime. That was justice. But whenever I think about him I remember his goodness to a slums family, too. So I look at you and I look at my Wanda, and I see your good points as well as your bad."

His voice became faintly sarcastic. "Does she have bad points?"

She withered him with a look. "I'll tell you what," she

smiled. "You discuss your wonderful break with me. Then you'll be happy and I'll have company while I wrestle with an elusive design on my drawing-board."

He found her interesting. This woman, he thought, walks in perpetual sunshine. She knows herself and life. He felt suddenly soothed and at peace.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With mingled emotions Johnny Graves followed a graceful, jonquil-yellow figure across the impressive lounge of the Starry Sky Recreation Club. He felt that from their chairs all people were looking at him, wondering what business he had in this domain of the elect, this stronghold of society where people could sit, if they wished, and trace their families back generation upon generation to medieval days of pomp and ceremony and entrenched power. He began to perspire, although the evening was reasonably cool. And remembering the reflection of himself that he had seen in the mirror in his room an hour ago, he wondered himself what he was doing in the club. The figure he had seen in the mirror had been the muscled figure of a working man, a figure carrying its fair share of scars, a figure that had done day labor, a figure that had suffered for want of food. And now had it become an elegant figure in the evening clothes of a gentleman? He rather doubted that. You were what you were, he thought, and not all the good clothes in the world could make a difference. In this room, forbidding with its quiet and dignity, he felt out of his element. His big chest longed for the easy comfort

of a sport shirt, his feet longed for the decent comfort of a working-man's shoes. And his ears wanted the laughter of working men, the songs of bayous and oil-fields and redwood forests. He shook his head as they reached the door of Mr. Borden's office. He recalled something the fawning servitor of the elect had said to him on the terrace of the suite in the Hotel Truellen. "You see, Mr. Graves, there is more to it than you thought. A moment ago you were scornful. Then you are accepted by them, and your attitude changes." Of a sudden he rather despised himself. If that were true, if his attitude had indeed changed, he was worthy of contempt. A more vindictive person would have reminded him that he had forced an engagement upon Wanda in order to encompass this triumph that now seemed to be disturbing him. But Wanda was not the same woman now who had hurried to Palm Canyon to accept, at last, the happiness of her dreams. She still felt cheap; she still felt as though she had played the part of fool to perfection. And with this sense of shame within her she was a far more understanding person than she had been in years. A smile touched her lips, and she had the curious desire to press his red head to her shoulder and tell him he had nothing, nothing at all, to fear. "It is open sesame, isn't it, to greater things than you have ever accomplished? That would seem to be the important thing."

"I keep recalling something Borden said to me the afternoon of the tea. We were out on the terrace and I was twitting him, as I shouldn't have done, about his unbecoming adulation of the so-called better people. Then

he told me I would be accepted into the club, and something odd happened to me. I felt as though some unseen force had picked me up and set me down upon a great seat of power and authority and prestige. It did something to me. And Borden nodded his head and chuckled. And then he said: 'You see, Mr. Graves, there is more to it than you thought. A moment ago you were scornful. Then you are accepted by them and your attitude changes.' He was right about that. And there's the rub, hang it. How do I know that I want this? How do I know that accepting a membership will be acceptable to my principles?"

"Your what?"

It was a sarcasm she regretted. His brows arched on his strong, broad forehead. "I would not be so snippy, if I were you."

She nodded her golden head, taking no offense. "Yes, I am the last person in the world to talk about such things as principles, aren't I?" She looked over the soft curve of her shoulder at the little corridor leading to Mr. Borden's office. "We'll skip it. As for the rest, you have as much right here as anyone. The sponsorship of Mr. Carruthers and Mrs. Stoddard would seem to indicate that. And by the way, there is one thing you must understand. Everyone here does not agree with Mr. Borden. How could they? It takes a special kind of mind to think in such terms. But they belong to the club because it is an agreeable place in which to sit of an evening. And a lot of business is done here, too. You see? They find the club of value. You will, too, I imagine."

He shrugged. "That development in Arizona will do

the country a lot of good. There's too much wasteland in Arizona. It is land that can be turned to a useful purpose if enough money can be found to tackle the job as it should be tackled. I would say that if membership in this club can help me to raise the money. . . ." He pursed his lips. Then, his red head high, he took a long step into the corridor.

Mr. Borden was waiting for them, and he had the card on the green blotter of his desk, a handsome, royal-blue card engraved in scarlet. Rising as they entered, he smiled upon the two of them. "This is a great honor, Mr. Graves. I find it exciting, always, to offer the facilities of this establishment to such persons as yourself."

"I find it exciting," said Johnny with a wry smile, "to be welcomed into the membership of such a club."

The card changed hands, as did a certain rather impressive sum of money. When they left the office ten minutes later, Johnny was officially a member of the club in good standing, a redhead with the opportunity to raise five million dollars glittering like a priceless jewel before him. Wanda, recalling their chat out on the desert under the hot sun, smiled in relief. "That does it, doesn't it, Mr. John Wilbur Graves?"

He looked down into her grave brown eyes. "I won't forget, of course. Even if the two of you had made a flop of the business, this would more than balance the money I would have lost. I won't forget it, I promise."

"You owe me nothing." She went out to the side lawn and dropped onto a bench before the illuminated swimming pool. Overhead the stars were thick and bright, and the moon sailed with majesty from cloud to

cloud, pouring down upon the passive earth a shower of silver that lit their surroundings with a strange, lurid beauty. She had to laugh at herself. "Isn't it interesting, Johnny, how so many foolish thoughts and so many foolish words are evoked by the light of the moon? I often wonder, now, if I would have been such an idiot if I had made it a point to talk to Michael only in the strong light of day."

"The same thing." He sat down, enjoying the night and the scent of her perfume and the way her hair stood soft and lustrous under the moon. He remembered the first time he had met her. Just seven or eight weeks ago? It seemed incredible. He felt that he had known her for years, felt, in a peculiar way, that he had known her, had had her in his blood, down through the centuries. "The same thing, because we are placed on earth, it seems to me, to learn the lessons we need to learn for our later life on some other plane. You had a need of this lesson, apparently, so he came into your life. You know, it really was just a crush. Then you lost the guy and pride wouldn't let you admit to yourself that you had had a crush on a scoundrel. You had to sell yourself the ridiculous notion that you had hurt him, and that in his hurt he had to find solace with Helene Peattie. That is all it ever was, I'm afraid, a rather terrible pride. I wouldn't worry too much about it now. It is over. It is a big world and life has a great, great deal to offer. Chalk it up to experience and let it go at that."

"Oh, I've already done that." Now her teeth flashed. In the moonlight something else flashed, and presently became recognizable to him as the engagement ring he

had slipped onto her finger to make the pretense look good. "Incidentally, you had better take this back. It is a very valuable ring."

He took it from her fingers and studied it. "You could have it as a bonus, if you wanted it. In another setting the diamond would make a nice piece of jewelry to keep as a souvenir."

"I'm a simple working girl, you see. I have no need of jewelry that expensive. I'd like to go back to New York."

It came as no surprise to him. She had fought the good fight and had won it, only to discover the victory hadn't been worth the time and trouble, the cheapening of herself. Change was inevitable, as inevitable as the rising sun, the tidal push of vast oceans. Yet it troubled him to think that it would be months before he would see her again. He had thoroughly enjoyed his dates with her. When she hadn't been brooding about the past, in fact, she had been lively, agreeable company. "What will I ever do for croquet?" he wondered aloud. "And who will go riding with me across the desert?"

"Aimee. And I imagine there will be other girls, Johnny."

"Other girls?"

She reached out with her warm hand and turned his head so that he was facing her. She laughed tremulously. "You know, you aren't exactly repulsive to the eye. And you are a gentleman of wealth, and acceptable to society. I have a notion you will meet a great many very lovely, very well-connected young ladies. Their mothers will see to that. You see, Johnny? Being of the elect does have

its drawbacks if you have daughters of marriageable age. They cannot marry just anyone. They must marry people of quality, and that sort of quality is limited. Oh, you'll be led a merry social life, I'll bet you on that."

He grunted. "I'm too busy for games of that sort. Me, I'm going to do great things in Arizona. Well, you may go to New York, if you like. Look around for a suitable suite of offices somewhere on Fifth Avenue. And do some chatting with executives of stores. I think Aimee ought to get to work at once dreaming up things for next winter's trade. By that time production should be moving along in high, don't you think?"

"Perhaps the fall trade, if we hurry."

He did some quick thinking. "I doubt it. They buy months ahead of time for obvious reasons. No. Make next winter your target, and let's try to have the returns at least pay the costs. It will be a couple of years before we make any real profit. But if all is put on a sound basis now, and if you and Aimee do your best, there is no reason why we all shouldn't be very, very successful."

She nodded. If it wasn't Michael it would be something. If it wasn't the happiness of her dreams, it would at least be an income worthy of attention. She stood up and held out her small, slender hand. "Will do. And thank you so much for everything, Johnny. I resented the engagement, but I was wrong about that. You helped us, and it was only right that I should help you. Good luck with the five million."

He nodded. When she left he remained seated there on the bench, looking at the water and marveling that a beautiful night could suddenly seem so cold, so utterly

empty. Women! Had he made a mistake to concentrate so upon business? He rubbed his cheek. Then, with a chuckle, he hurried back to the lounge. Five minutes later he was making a tour of the lounge with dignified Mr. Borden, bowing over the hands of society ladies, and shaking hands heartily with their husbands and escorts and sons. When he met Mr. Carruthers he grunted. Five minutes later the men were smoking cigars and discussing a certain business enterprise with enthusiasm, with heat, with hope and with caution. . . .

Wanda drove back to the hotel slowly. She felt free, suddenly, gloriously free, and the thought of returning to the suite filled her with a certain impatience. There had been, she decided, too much of the suite of late. Nothing to do there but think, nothing to do there but remember and regret and fight silly tears that persisted in rising to silly eyes. What she wanted now was excitement. What she wanted now were people, people by the hundreds, people to laugh with her and agree with her that all men were scoundrels. On an impulse she turned the car off Thrace and drove down the quiet side street to Quinby's Rest. Quinby, the wretch, would be no excitement at all, but at least she would be someone different to talk with, at least she would help her to fill some idle time agreeably. Parking the car before the small, very correct hotel, she stepped quickly into the tranquil lobby and rapped on the door of Quinby's apartment. But a chuckle caused her hand to fall lightly to her side. Turning around, she met the brown eyes of the fat man who had tried to comfort her in Palm Canyon ages and ages and ages ago. A flush of pleasure rose to her young cheeks. "Mr. Waldman! Goodness, this is

nice. But what are you doing here? Don't tell me that you have lost your heart, too, to my old governess."

"My wife Reba has." That reminded him of something. He wagged a finger under her nose. "You still haven't visited my Reba, you know. Aren't you ashamed? Is your life so full that you haven't the time, Miss Ericson, to meet some decent people?"

She sighed. "I've been busy, as you doubtless know." She went back into the lobby and seated herself on a couch. "It's so nice here, don't you think? Oh, the Truellen is a grand place, don't misunderstand me. But this place is Quinby, as correct as Quinby, as peaceful as Quinby, as solid and safe and happy as Quinby. Or can you say of a building that it is a happy building?"

"Some of them have an aura of happiness." He lowered himself into a club chair. He pursed his lips while he studied the small-boned, dainty features of her face. He was not astonished to see little crescents of blue under her eyes. Susans, he remembered, always wept copiously when they had come to the end of love's road. And it was a good thing, he thought, that they did. In the end tears did wash things from the heart. And so, in the end, the heart was made ready for a new adventure in love, perhaps the greatest adventure of all. "Some places have an atmosphere of happiness, too. Like Palm Canyon, where I met you first. But I imagine you haven't happy memories of the place now. Still, I have no regrets. It seemed to me time that someone took the trouble to end a wretched situation. And it is over, isn't it?"

She looked at him in a dazed way. "You sent him to me?"

He felt the storm of anger gathering within her, but

the threat of storm didn't perturb him. He looked around the room. It was plain and clean, with old-fashioned prints on the walls, and floral draperies at the windows. It was not an impressive room, yet he felt with her that it was a pleasant and peaceful room, a room of happiness. Happiness, he thought moodily, how difficult it was to find. He wondered if it were true that happiness, like all worthwhile things, had to be earned. He supposed that it was true.

"What did you hope would happen, Mr. Waldman?"

He spread his hands. "What did happen, of course. You were pursuing a chimera, I am sorry to say. You were chasing the proverbial will-o' the wisp. It was my feeling that the pursuit would end if and when you found the truth. That struck me as being logical."

"You knew he didn't love me?"

"My dear girl!" He began to laugh, then choked laughter down. When you were twenty-one you were much too serious about some things. "I knew he didn't love you. For the obvious reason, the reason you continued to overlook. When men love they marry the girls of their hearts. Love is a strange thing. For it men will fight and steal and even kill. To say that a man in love could turn his back on his beloved to marry for money is to utter a very ridiculous thing. It is against Nature, you see. Instinctively we take that which is dearest to our hearts. When we love, we marry. When we don't love, then we marry someone else for other reasons. Do you see?"

She could not forget the kiss that had wrenched her from the dream world. The memory infuriated her all

over again. She had gone to him with her whole heart. And what had she found? Her brown eyes flashed. "I wanted to kill him. I wanted to blind him."

"Don't say such things," he said sternly, "even though you don't mean them. There is too much killing in this world, too much violence."

"But then I decided he was beneath contempt. I decided that to touch him would be to dirty myself more."

"Naturally. You are like my Susan. You can sometimes be very silly, but your heart is in the right place. Oh, I'm not complimenting you, Miss Ericson. The same thing may be said of most human beings. So at last it is over. Now, at last, you can take the happiness you have found here and go on to the good life, eh? I shall tell you something that makes me very happy. I have spent a great deal of time here, time that could have been employed to make more money. But it seemed to me that—"

"Oh, but haven't you heard? I'm going back to New York to open a suite of offices for the firm."

He stared. "You're leaving Palm Springs? But I thought that Johnny would be in this area for months."

She chuckled. "Oh, the engagement was pretense, of course, as you no doubt knew all along. So now I am myself again, and Johnny has what he wants, and pretense comes to an end. I imagine he will be in this area for months. But as for myself . . ."

He glared. "The man loves you, you fool."

She stood up. "I know. But he doesn't really know that. And to tell you the truth, Mr. Waldman, it would make no difference to me if he did. I loved Michael,

you see. And that love made me do all sorts of rotten things. Now it is over. That is to say, I have no more hope that involves Michael. But is love something you turn on and off at will, like a faucet? It isn't. I may go on for the rest of my life with a part of me still in love with Michael. So really, what difference could even the admitted love of Johnny for me have? It would be unwelcome. So, for that matter, would he be unwelcome to me in New York."

"My dear girl . . ."

"You did help, and I thank you for that, Mr. Waldman. I think that if I had married Michael a part of me would have been ashamed for the rest of my life. You see, marriage is sacred, and it is a sin to come between a man and his wife. But as for helping me any further, that won't be necessary. Wanda is a big girl now. From now on Wanda can look after herself—which she will. Me, I'm going to be a lady of affairs, Mr. Waldman. Me, I'm going to have a career that will make your eyes pop."

His eyes did pop, but for another reason. Why, it was Johnny Graves talking, Johnny who began so many of his sentences with the pronoun "Me." He wagged his head as the girl left. Why had he gone down into the Canyon that afternoon? He had come to Palm Springs to rest, not to worry about another Susan.

Deciding not to wait for Miss Quinby, he wrote a note for her at the desk, and hurried back into the starlit night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This time there was a leisurely and less expensive trip across the continent by bus. Aimce had insisted that she didn't need the car, but Wanda, uncertain about road conditions, had been just as insistent that it would be folly for her to attempt the great mountain passes at this season of the year. The fact that the buses took her to New York with no difficulty to speak of made her feel something of an alarmist, but it was still pleasant to be in New York without the problem of automobile traffic to trouble her. Stepping out of the terminal on West Thirty-fourth Street, she walked to the subway kiosk on Eighth Avenue and took a local downtown to West Fourth Street. She found, passing through Washington Square Park, that the first touch of spring had come to New York and that all the Greenwich Village cafeteria set had come out to enjoy the warm slants of the sun. She nodded and smiled at the little, elderly lady who went through the park with a cart to collect unwanted newspapers. The air was a bit cool, and New York impressed her as being terribly noisy and confusing. Yet she was glad to be home. She had a feeling, as she mounted the stoop of her father's brick house on Washington

Square North, that now, at long last, she could live in peace.

A big grin spread across Maggie Washington's face as she opened the street door. "I thought I recognized that ring, honey lamb. Great day in the morning, won't your father be happy, though."

"Hello, Maggie." She kissed the housekeeper's plump cheek and hurried into the living room. But she found the room empty. The housekeeper giggled. "A great man of business your father is today, honey lamb. You know what that fool man has gone and done? That fool man has gone to get himself into the television business. You know what he says? He says the television business is the biggest business to hit this here country since radio. He says that when that there coaxial cable is stretched from New York to California the television business will be the biggest business in this here nation. Yup, that's what your father says."

"He's right, too, Maggie." She had to laugh. "He has to keep on trying, doesn't he?"

Maggie shrugged her massive shoulders. "He sure ain't got nothing much else to do, has he? I know that fool man. He won't never be happy out of harness. Without a business to fool around with, he'll just shrivel up and die."

Wanda, going upstairs to her old room, was less inclined to argue that matter than she had been ever since her father's industrial empire had been brought to dust. She felt closer to her father than she had felt in years. In disappointment she had suffered the same pain as he had suffered, and in work she was trying to find the

same balm. She had a quick shower and lay down for a nap. But here as in Palm Springs her mind refused to let go of the subject. Again she felt shame and anger, again her heart cried out for the blood of Michael Peattie. And then a new thought came into her mind, and she wondered about Johnny Graves and whether she shouldn't marry him before he grew interested in someone else. As his wife she would be a rich woman again; as a rich woman she could help Aimee and some of the other moneyless people she knew. And after a fashion, she supposed, she would be happy. It might not be singing bliss, but it would certainly be at least a part of the real thing. Why, she could even help her father if her father were seriously interested in getting into the television business. And one great day she might see him sitting, a wiser man, on his throne once more.

The thoughts made her restless and she sat up on the bed, a fetching figure of a girl in brilliant red pajamas. Getting up, she threw her robe about her shoulders and sat down at her desk. Taking a sheet of notepaper from the drawer, she picked up her fountain pen to write Johnny Graves a short note. But then the baseness of it made itself manifest in her mind, and her lips curled and her hands tore the paper to shreds. Changing into a warm woollen suit and taking her coat from the closet, she went back to the street. Hailing a cab, she went uptown to the Winstons' home standing in heavy majesty on upper Fifth Avenue. She smiled at the butler, who was still the same stiff figure of dignity. "Mrs. Winston at home, Roberts? I thought I would like to chat with her."

"How nice to see you again, Miss Ericson." He bowed and smiled, then led her along an oak-paneled wall to an oak-paneled study. "Mrs. Winston is attending a function at the Waldorf, but Master Winston is home."

"Master?" She chuckled as she stepped into the study. She contemplated the portly figure seated behind the desk and shook her golden head in reproof. "Phil, aren't you too old to be called Master Winston?"

"Roberts remembers me as a toddler in three-cornered trousers, I'm afraid. I'm afraid that to Roberts I will always be that toddler." He kissed her cheek warmly, exclaimed that she felt cold, and hustled her to a chair before the small, crackling fire. His memory proved to be as excellent as ever. He went to the door and ordered hot chocolate and when it had been brought indulged himself in a cup, paying particular attention to the business of getting more than his fair share of the whipped cream. She had an idea that when he was Mr. Waldman's age he would weigh every ounce as much as the fat motion-picture producer. "You should stick to your diet, Phil. Haven't you ever heard the saying that no one loves a fat man?"

He waved an airy, carefree hand. "Like most sayings, it has little basis in truth. Besides, I am much too busy to think in terms of love. Has anyone told you that I am going to build another hospital for crippled children? It is a fact. My father protests. He seems to have the idea that when I die I should leave for my heirs more money than he will leave to me. Such an absurdity. Also, it really cannot be done in this age of high taxes."

"Phil, how wonderful."

He nodded. "The money will be more useful that way anyway. And speaking of usefulness . . ."

"It is working out. We scored a triumph. A modest triumph, true, but a triumph nevertheless. We sold about thirty-five hundred dollars' worth of things, and Johnny Graves, our backer, has announced that he is satisfied. So here I am, Phil, to open a suite of offices on Fifth and to do some talking to store executives and the like."

"A good idea." His purple eyes narrowed. "This Mr. Graves is quick to use connections. I see."

"That is the value of connections, wouldn't you say?"

"Still, I would prefer to see you in something else. I assume, of course, that Michael Peattie is now ancient history?"

"Ancient history." She looked at the crackling, leaping tongues of flame. It had been in this study, she remembered, that she had sat the day before she had left for Palm Springs to reclaim the man she had lost to a so-called best friend. And here in this study, she remembered, Phil had taken advantage of their long friendship to give her the scolding of his life. At the time he had called her, among other things, an unrealistic creature heading straight for a fall. She had laughed. Looking at him, full of confidence and pride and quite aware of her beauty, she had crisply informed him that Helene, not herself, was the woman who was heading straight for a fall. And now here she was back in New York, and the treasure at the end of the rainbow had proved to be nothing but rusty scraps of iron. "You were right," she said bluntly. "But I had to learn that for myself, it seems.

This Mr. Graves has a theory that we are placed on earth to learn the things we'll need to know on another plane of existence. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps that is why I had to go to Palm Springs?"

He was interested. He had very frequently entertained these thoughts himself. "Apparently there is more to this Mr. Graves than opportunism. I would like to have a chat with him on the subject one of these days."

She raised the cocoa toward her lips. "Oh, I'm afraid he will be much too busy for that. Johnny Graves is a doer, Phil. And he has a dream something like the dream you have. He sees himself as a developer of America, just as you see yourself as the benefactor of the crippled. At the moment he is probably somewhere in Arizona, trying to convince Mr. Carruthers he should invest some money in an enterprise to transform wasteland into a productive area. Quite a job, that. You should see Arizona. For mile upon mile the desert stretches, leading you through bare hills and mesas and cactus and whirl winds. Oh, it is certainly a beautiful sight. I could cheerfully spend a few years of my life wandering about the desert with someone who really knew it. But still, it should be something more than the haunt of quail and lizards and the like. Johnny feels that, and so if he has his way the dry and wrinkled face of the desert will undergo great changes."

He was struck by the glow in her eyes. It was a glow that changed her face quite as much in its way as Mr. Graves hoped to change the face of the desert. He grew very much interested. "You seem to like this Mr. Graves. I retract my original statement about him."

"I was engaged to him. Yes, I dare say that I liked him."

"Yes, I heard about that. Knowing the situation, I knew it was merely a stratagem. Liking you, I'm glad the end wasn't what you hoped it would be." Finished with his cocoa, he put his cup onto the little serving wagon and went to one of the bookcases. "The last thing by Michael Peattie, incidentally, wasn't much good."

"How could it be? Michael doesn't know himself, so how can he hope to know others? Phil, I don't want to talk about him, though. I came to ask you several favors."

"Oh, I've already helped your father with a little capital."

"Phil, you're a darling."

He kissed the crown of her golden head. "You were always a good sort, Wanda. I have always liked to think of you as my very, very beautiful younger sister. Why shouldn't I help the old boy? He has learned his lesson."

"And names, Phil, I want loads and loads of names."

"Phew." He went back to the chair behind the desk. "What a greedy little thing you are."

"A girl must have something, Phil."

He nodded. He searched through his memory and wrote down the pertinent names as they came to him. Half an hour later he saw her to the door and returned to the study to brood over what-might-have-beens. "Roberts," he sighed as the butler came in to remove the cocoa things, "she would have made such a fine figurehead for my new convalescent home for crippled children. She has sympathy and a sense of fun. She could have met charitable-minded people on equal terms, and I have an

idea the children would have loved her."

The butler nodded. "But still," he said, speaking with the liberty of a man who had on occasion paddled the bottom of Master Philip, "she is young. Do you recall that visit we made to St. Giles Home for Crippled Children out in Garden City? Ladies of experience, great experience, operate that institution, and the result is quite good. I should say, sir . . ."

"Oh, you're right, I dare say, you're right." Philip Winston settled back on his chair as the butler withdrew. With unseeing eyes he looked at the pictures on the walls and at the titles of books in the built-in cases. Then he had an idea, and bent over his work anew. A truly good athletic field. That was a must. At the St. Giles Home for Crippled Children out in Garden City, he had stood with Roberts for a full hour before the great wooden toboggan slide, watching the crippled youngsters play a game of baseball on their small diamond. Sport was sport, whether you were crippled or not. And play did help to strengthen young muscles, did it not?

Going back to the house in Washington Square North, Wanda smiled to find her father at home, sitting in the worn chair at the window. She kissed him and ran her hand fondly through his prematurely white hair. "Have fun, O Lord of Industry?"

"I am giving Maggie the sack at the end of the month. She had no right to spoil the surprise."

"Poor Maggie, to be cast adrift at her age. Will it be all right, do you suppose, for me to drop a coin into her beggar's cup from time to time?"

He grunted. "I had fun. And I accomplished something. As a matter of fact I have, with the aid of young Phil Winston, bought a small factory in Brooklyn. With proper methods and a really well-designed set, I have a notion I shall do all right."

"Dad!"

"You will, of course, come into the business with me. This dress business isn't for you at all. It all comes from Aimee. Your only value to the organization is your position. It is still silly to attempt to make a fortune on so flimsy a thing as that. No. You make money when you have material things to sell. Aimee has her talent, you have nothing. You follow me?"

"But they sent me here to New York to open a suite of offices. I couldn't let them down."

"I doubt they are very much interested in that any more, my dear." He dug into his pocket and drew out a telegram. "I took the liberty of opening this, afraid it might be something of importance. It is. Miss Reynaud is pleased to announce that she has become engaged to Mr. John Wilbur Graves."

"She is *what*?"

He handed her the telegram. 'I have already dispatched to Miss Reynaud our great wishes for her happiness. I am sure you wanted me to do that. How nice for Aimee. On the roof of a tenement she dared to dream, and now, at last, her dreams come true.'

On the roof of a tenement, thought Wanda Ericson. On the roof of a tenement. A little mist appeared before her eyes. "Yes, Dad, how nice for Aimee. I'm glad you sent her our good wishes."

She sat down, thinking, remembering. She remembered a desert hot and shimmering in the full tides of the sun. She remembered good sandwiches and ice cold tomato juice, she remembered a man telling her that he didn't like her a bit. And she remembered more: she remembered a strong man suddenly made nervous by his fears in the lounge of the Starry Sky Recreation Club. She remembered how she had felt a curious desire to pull his head to her shoulder to comfort him and encourage him. John Wilbur Graves. An opportunist, yes, a hard, driving man of business. And yet he had been something more to her than that. He had been a man telling Michael Peattie to leave town, not because he himself was in love with her, but because in his good hearted way he had wanted to spare her further hurt. And how generous he had always been, and how much fun they'd had in the days of their so-called engagement. She shook her golden head and felt a great emptiness. No more business to worry about? No more Aimee to help and to encourage and to work with? She loosed a long, heartfelt sigh. "Life seems to be a business of saying goodbye, Dad. People come into your life for a brief hour, and then they are gone, leaving only memories to mark their passing. How strange. Yes, and how awful!"

"But there are always more people. And there are so many, many things to do. For example, this television business . . ."

"Phil has offered me a job, too. I think he wants me to preside as the figurehead director of a new institution he is going to build for crippled children. Dad, remember St. Giles out in Garden City?"

His face tautened, as with pain. "I remember a great deal about Garden City. I remember our small but pleasant estate on Hilton Avenue. I remember the house your mother and I had built. I remember the cathedral pushing its spire upward as though to pierce the blue sky. I had happiness in Garden City, and you never forget places or people that have given you happiness."

"Big parties, Dad. Weren't we in the social swim, though! I remember the way I used to skate on the pond, and I remember how a lot of us girls used to gather before bonfires to toast marshmallows. And the trees there were so beautiful in the fall, weren't they, Dad?"

He stared. Were those tears in her eyes? Good heavens!

"You mustn't think about the past," he said crisply. "It is the present that should concern us, the solid reality of the present. And the present fact is . . ."

"But I wanted the dress business to be a success. I wanted our fashion-house to become famous to the world!"

"My dear girl . . ."

"And Johnny Graves isn't in love with her. He's just a lonely man who is making an arrant fool of himself, so there."

The doorbell rang, and Maggie creaked down the hall in her shoes to answer the ring. Then up the hall into the living room came her contralto voice: "Mr. Michael Peattie? Just a moment, sir, and I'll see if Miss Wanda is in."

Said Mr. Ericson firmly: "The man is a bad writer. He knows neither life nor people. Do send him away."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Small, dignified Mr. Borden glanced around the lounge of his beloved club and heaved a long, doleful sigh. Once again another season had come to an end, once again the moment of parting was at hand. Already Mrs. Stoddard had left for the East, taking with her the Misses Abercrombie, Endicott and Fuller. Mr. Luke Patson was in Los Angeles at the moment, waiting for a steamer which would carry him across the broad Pacific to New Zealand. One by one they had gone, one by one they were about to go. And the warm weather would come to Palm Springs, and months of discomfort and dullness would press in upon him and life would be unutterably dreary. He went out to the swimming pool which had, at the height of the season, been the hang out of the young who would one day step into the shoes of their parents. But now the swimming pool was all but abandoned, too: only one swimmer was to be seen and she, of course, didn't count. Looking at the bright red bathing-cap, he wondered what Wanda Ericson of the distinguished Ericsons was thinking. The whole thing bothered Mr. Borden. He did not feel it was fair that an Ericson should be disappointed in love a second time

by a mere nobody. But when the swimmer came nimbly out of the pool he bowed and smiled and kept this thought to himself. After all, Miss Reynaud was engaged to Mr. Graves, and Mr. Graves had found favor in the eyes of such persons as Mr. Carruthers and Mrs. Stoddard. That being so, Mr. Graves belonged. That being so, the woman who would marry Mr. Graves also belonged. "Have a nice swim, Miss Reynaud? It is so nice to see someone using the pool. I do wish more of the members would remain in Palm Springs the full year around. After all, Palm Springs does have its virtues even in the summer-time."

"So Johnny Graves insists, Mr. Borden." The snub-nosed, red-headed woman smiled, an athletic, attractive figure in her bright green bathing suit. "As a matter of fact, Johnny Graves is going to make his home here, Mr. Borden."

It warmed the cockles of the man's heart. Perhaps the example set by Mr. Graves would give other distinguished persons the good idea of establishing their permanent residences in the resort city. After all, there was such a thing as air-conditioning. And bodies soon accustomed themselves to heat as well as cold. He saw no reason for people to shun Palm Springs on the ground that it was hot, while at the same time they cheerfully went off to live in the East and the West with their sub-zero cold. "How nice, Miss Reynaud. If Mr. Graves is seeking some property you must have him come to me. I know the values around here, and of course, as director of this club, I would be happy to help."

The girl nodded, stifling a snicker as the man, with

an air of melancholy, continued to walk about the grounds of his now all but deserted club. Then, tiring of the sun and her own company, she went back to the dressing room and had a quick shower. In a simple white cotton dress she walked back along Thrace to the Hotel Truellen. At the desk she found a telegram from the Ericsons waiting for her, but the message gave her no pleasure at all. Sighing, she went back to the suite and sat down on a sofa in the lush living room. She wondered if she had done the wise thing. She wondered if Wanda would ever speak to her again. "I am a fool," she said aloud, "playing a fool's game."

Changing into a linen suit, she went over to the Hotel Golden Desert and stepped out to the croquet court in the rear. Meeting the green eyes of Johnn Graves, she smiled dolefully. "An answer was received. They wish us all the best."

His big hands tightened on the handle of the mallet. Then around came the mallet in a vicious swing to send the red-striped ball zooming to the far end of the green court. He dropped the mallet and took the telegram from her hand. He read it, then laughed sourly. "Apparently it was a silly idea. I don't mean the trick, I mean the thought that prompted the trick. It was too soon, wasn't it? Call her a fool, but give her credit for having been genuinely in love with the author. That being the case, it would take time, isn't that so?"

"I imagine so." She nibbled on her nether lip. "Wanda was never one to do anything quickly, let alone get over love to fall into love a second time. Perhaps that is what Mr. Borden means when he says there's a difference

between thoroughbreds and people like us. We seem to live closer to the surface of our emotions, while they seem to feel more slowly, but much, much more deeply."

"Bunk. Borden is an insufferable snob. All this talk about thoroughbreds is so much rot. People are people, and family stock is family stock. Some are more distinguished than others, not because of their breeding, but because of their minds. Was Shakespeare a descendant of a fine old family? Did Pasteur number among his ancestors some of the great of the earth? The only standard is accomplishment, no matter what a dying race of men like Mr. Borden seem to believe. The world changes, my sweet, and you ride along with those changes. Don't listen to idiocies about tradition and breeding and the like. This is the age of the common man, the age when at last the world accepts the truth that it is what we are that really counts. Waldman! There stands as good a man as any whose name is to be found in the Social Register."

"Still, we are what our backgrounds have made us, our training, our traditions. In the end Wanda proved that, didn't she? He was there for the taking, Johnny. She could have had him. Yet even then she couldn't compromise. It had to be genuine, or not at all. My approach would be different. You ask me to marry you, and whether you love me or not, I will."

"I'd break your heart, honey, you know that?"

"It would be fun while it lasted."

"We just don't click together, honey. That's a shame, in a way. We are two of a kind. We have come up from the slums, fighting and winning our battles. We think

the same language and we talk the same language. And yet . . ."

"She is nice, drat her, I'll give her that. Never a snob, Johnny. Always a great lover of people. She disliked Helene, yet she went out of her way to foil Mr. Borden's little plot to ease a 'nobody' from the club. She went out of her way to help me. Yes, a nice person."

"She was very beautiful that night at the show, Aimee. I couldn't take my eyes from her. She was an aristocrat, yes. Yet when she smiled at you she was more than just that. Funny, isn't it, that I should come prepared to dislike her and end up, in a split second, in love with her?"

"Or . . . are you, Johnny? Men in love, they say, go out to fight for their ladies. They don't seek to win them back with cheap little tricks."

"But very often a trial balloon is useful. This way I have information to work with. Now I see that a trip to New York would be a waste of time."

"Do you?" Aimee Reynaud sighed. She wished that she didn't like Wanda. She wished that just once in her life she could be utterly selfish, utterly ruthless. Mrs. John Wilbur Graves. Why, there was music in the name. And as owner of the name, what a great and beautiful and wonderful life she would have! In time he might even grow to love her. In time . . .

"Care to have a game, Aimee?"

"Not now, Johnny. You see, I happen to love Wanda after my fashion. And I love you, it seems, enough to want to see you very happy. So I shall be fair. I shall ask you one question. The rest will be up to you."

"How solemn you are!"

"I could marry you, Johnny. When a man begins to

think in terms of marriage, he is a setup for a determined woman who isn't exactly repulsive to the eye. I could worm my way into your heart, and the first thing you know, you would be married to me. Only I'm not that sort. So perhaps I am saying goodbye to a dream. And that, Johnny, is always an occasion that calls for solemnity."

"Your question??" he demanded sharply.

"It is this, Johnny. Wanda also loves me as I love her. That being so, did you really expect her to come back to Palm Springs to fight me?"

"She fought another best friend, as I recall it."

Red appeared in the sky, and across the desert came a cool, scented wind.

"Well," came the charged voice, "answer me."

Instead, Aimee turned on her heel and went back to the Hotel Truellen. Rapping softly on the door of the Waldman suite, she stood waiting to be let in. So it went, she thought moodily, so it went. For each triumph there was a balancing disappointment. Lucky at cards, unlucky at love. Lucky at business, unlucky at love. She smiled into Abraham Waldman's brown eyes. "Are you a superstitious man, Mr. Waldman?"

"A stupid man, it would appear." He closed the door behind her. He waved her to a chair and went back to his writing desk. "I should not have interfered, perhaps. But I had this strong feeling that each of us had a duty to those with whom we came into contact. I felt that if I in my way did what I could to help the young people to happiness, then I was contributing more to the world than . . ."

"You did your best."

"Or perhaps I did my worst. Mr. Peattie, it seems, on the strength of the job I gave him at the studio, has gone to New York to fight for the love of Wanda Ericson. So the whole thing begins again, the whole dreadful cycle of unhappiness. Helene loves him and wants him as her husband. And Johnny loves Wanda, and wants her as his wife. And it would seem that if there were any justice in this world the proper loves could come together to produce happiness for all concerned. I thought I had helped. And I find, instead, that I have made a bad mistake. I am returning to Hollywood to make motion pictures, Miss Reynaud. I have bungled. Now I shall go back to the business that I know."

"Wanda doesn't love Michael," said the girl firmly "Whatever she had in her heart for him died that afternoon at the Canyon. You were right to send him to her. When he seemed available her pride was satisfied. Then she could think again, then she could see that which had been there all along for her to see."

It perked him up. "You honestly believe that?"

"I'll tell you something more, you old doubting Thomas, you. I had a long chat with Michael one afternoon at the suite. He seemed to find peace with me. He seemed able to talk to me as he'd been unable to talk to anyone before. He was very frank. His interest, of course, was the Ericson money. When the Ericson money disappeared his interest became the Stryton money. But it was more than the money, it seems. There was a very genuine fondness for Helene. As a matter of fact, I suspect that deep, deep within him Michael was in love with Helene. Maybe I'm wrong

about that. But that is my guess."

"But he's in New York!"

"To make his peace with Wanda, I should imagine. And en route to Boston, I should imagine, for another talk with his wife. No, you were right to interfere. People are people. We are all in the boat together. For good or ill, we are linked to people for the rest of our lives. That being the case, how sensible it is to help people when we can. Aside from helping them, we are in effect helping ourselves, helping to make this world a pleasanter place to live in. No. Don't scold yourself, Mr. Waldman. You made the effort. You talked with Michael and the meeting at the Canyon did occur. Wanda came to her senses, which is important. Michael learned a truth about himself, which is also important. That is very important, come to think of it."

Happiness returned to his brown eyes. "You must come to Hollywood, Miss Reynaud. I liked your things. I am sure there is a future for you in Hollywood."

"Hollywood!"

Her expression amused him. "It is just a place, my dear girl. People live there and work there, very nice people, taken all in all. You will like it, I am sure."

It made Aimee's senses swim. Hollywood! Land of motion pictures and fabulous stars, land of opportunity, a very genuine opportunity for a designer who knew her business. Perhaps there would be a house, perhaps her father could quit his job as night watchman and come to live out the rest of his days with her in comfort and peace.

Little tears welled to her eyes. "The dreams we dream,

Mr. Waldman. Oh, the pain and beauty of those dreams!"

The door opened and Reba Waldman came in, her arms filled with packages. She looked at the redhead seated in the chair and smiled happily. "How nice to see you again, Kitty Dolan. Abie. I'm asking Kitty to dinner, all right?"

Aimee decided that she loved these people. They were important, yet they had the time, always, to be themselves.

She rose, smiling. "An invitation I'll be happy to accept, Mrs. Waldman. But will you excuse me for an hour? I have something else to say to Johnny Graves."

But he was not to be found at his hotel, nor was he to be found in the club. There in the darkened club only Mr. Borden was still to be found, a man for whom life had ended until another gay season rolled around.

"Now that the season is over, Miss Reynaud, we are shutting up early each day. The workers have worked hard, and now their vacation time has come around."

"I was looking for Mr. Graves, Mr. Borden."

He led the way outdoors and sat down to watch the play of sunset light and shadow upon the brooding desert. "I am older," he said. "Is that a peculiar thought? I imagine it is, but I always think it when another season has come to an end. And I think other things, Miss Reynaud. I wonder if, when the new season has come, I'll be here at the same old stand to welcome my patrons to Palm Springs for more months of pleasure. That is such a good time of the year for me, Miss Reynaud. I live for that."

She felt sorry for this elderly man with the gray mustache and the winged collar and the black string necktie. "For nothing more, Mr. Borden?"

His back became ramrod straight. "I detect in your tones, Miss Reynaud, a certain pity. I am not now, nor will I ever be, a suitable object for pity."

"I glance around, Mr. Borden, and see so many more important things than position. For example, there is the sunset. And there is the desert. And here in this town are all sorts of fine people. Maybe they aren't of the elect, but they have good hearts and good minds and they are the stuff, when all is said and done, of which America is made. Mind, I say nothing against the elite. Certainly many of them have contributed solidly to the advancement of this country and of humanity. But it would seem to me that . . ."

"We each have our world," he said stiffly. "Mine is the world of these people I admire and respect, yes, and love. I cannot change. If I could change, I would not. They are links with a noble past, Miss Reynaud. They are the preservers of the great tradition, they are the molders of our culture, they are the genius behind our business and economic structure. On this earth, there will always be the rulers and the ruled. I glance behind the iron curtain at Russia and see the rule of the proletariat, and I thank God for the fact that I shall not live to see that dictatorship established here. Call me silly, call me a man bowing down to the idol of position, as some have. But there are my feelings on the subject. They are ladies and gentlemen. They know how life should be lived, and linking present with past, they

bring us, in the end, to a fine, genteel future."

"I acknowledge accomplishment. As for the rest, the blood in your veins, Mr Borden, is just as old as the blood in their veins "

"Of no distinction "

"The blood of working people? There I differ from you. Each person has its place, each thing. The one cannot survive without the other. I learned that in the slums. You know, life in the slums teaches one a great many things."

"Please, Miss Reynaud, please."

The girl snickered. "Oh. I won't embarrass you here in your club, Mr Borden. Johnny Graves and I are not to be married after all."

"No?" He stared. Then he rose and his eyes flashed behind the lenses of his glasses. "In that case, Miss Reynaud, you of course will understand why the facilities of this club are no longer open to you?"

Aimee understood perfectly. Nor did it matter to her about the club. It stood upon shifting sands, the jewel-like structure. False ideas had built it, and false ideas would bring it to ruin. A girl with a bright future, she had no time to waste on archaic notions and false values. She hurried back to the Waldmans. If Johnny was not at the club or at his hotel, then Johnny, she could feel it in her bones, was en route to New York.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The night was cool, perhaps too cool for strolling, but neither of the walkers seemed to be particularly uncomfortable. Along Fifth Avenue they walked past the great hotels, past the grubby small shops district, then past the great stores with their lighted windows and cleverly worked out displays. Nearing the Forty-second Street Library, they looked at the stone lions standing eternal guard at the steps, then mounted those steps and wended their way along a quiet path to the benches of the little park. There they sat down, each busy with his thoughts, each recording with his ears the tolling of a clock from somewhere behind them. As the last stroke of the clock faded into the general hum of the city, Michael Peattie smiled. "So another day ends and again the night falls. And in the dark shadows of the night so many things happen. Perhaps something good will come out of this trip, Wanda? Perhaps I will think up a good yarn and set it here in this city. New York should make an interesting locale. It certainly is a city of contrasts, isn't it? Yes, I shall put that way into my mind and give it some thought when I'm back to the business of producing again."

"Make it a good story, Michael. You can write, you know, when you really buckle down to an honest day's work. I remember the review you once showed me, the review on your first book. The critic said yours was a genuine talent. You went astray somewhere. Find out why, and then get back onto the right path. There, is that a promise?"

He gave her a long glance. He felt he scarcely knew her. She was a woman with more depth than he had realized, a woman of strange strength as well as rare beauty. He felt suddenly that the man who married her would be a fortunate man indeed. At the end of the day that man would find there within the confines of his own house all that a woman could possibly be. He sighed. His mind slid down the hill of the past years, slid down into a Canyon, into a grove of willows and cottonwoods standing humbly at the bases of towering Washingtonia palms. He felt that he had lost something fine there in that clearing. He felt that a part of him would forever seek that quality he had lost. He shook his head. "Do you really want that, Wanda?"

"I want it. I want to be able to tell my children one of these days that once upon a time I knew one of the great writers of our age. It will be a nice thing to look back upon."

"And the hatred, the anguish? Wanda, could I do it I would make it all up to you. There, I came to New York to tell you that. I feel as though I've just emerged from a nightmare, a fearsome nightmare. I feel I have wrestled with shadowy monsters; I feel—but one cannot undo the past, can one? The action stands for all time.

One can apologize, but it will not erase the record, will it?"

"The future is more interesting to think about, don't you agree, Michael? Let me put it this way. Once upon a time a golden-haired girl had a crush on a very handsome and worldly author. But it was not really love, it was simply a crush. So the crush ended, in storm and anger, perhaps, and in tears. It was right for it to end, and it was right that each should learn from the whole affair. I have learned and you have learned. There, it is finished. Now you will go back to your Helene, and I will go on to my future. No recriminations, no grudges to be harbored. Yes, that way is best."

"Graves loves you, you know."

"I know."

"A better man than I, Graves."

"I wouldn't think that, Michael. He found what he wanted in his work. You had to find what you wanted in another field."

"Yet he must have had his temptations. And he must have had his economic needs. Yet he stood firmly by his principles, while I—"

"I like to think," she interrupted, "that the marriage to Helene was not solely a marriage for money. Aimee told me once that she doubted it was. And Aimee is a shrewd gal. She must have seen something—"

"Or been trying to be kind, fine lady that she is."

She looked at her watch. Ten minutes past eight! All afternoon they had talked, his first day in New York, and it seemed to her that they had been talking for hours every day since then. Yet what had they said to one an-

other, really? Of what importance to each of them had been this meeting? She shook her head. "Michael, shall I tell you something more?"

"What more is there to say?"

"Just this. Michael, I am very glad I met you. I want to be friends with you always. If there ever is anything that I can do for you, will you let me know?"

He reached for her hand and found it and gave it a squeeze. "I think you mean that. And I'm glad, Wanda. I wouldn't want to go through life as your enemy I mean that."

She nodded. "Now you had better go over to Penn Station and catch your train. You will have more important things to discuss with Helene."

He became tense and moody "If she will see me, that is."

"Oh, she will see you. I have seen to that. I told her on the telephone last night that she should see you. She has been miserable without you, so she will. You see, Michael? If I was silly you were silly, too. Now silliness must come to an end, don't you think?"

He jumped to his feet. A great happiness filled him, and he wanted to shout and sing with that happiness. But he did neither. He bent over and kissed the cool cheek and sighed. "Good luck, Wanda, good luck always."

He turned and hurried to the exit of the little park. In the quiet night air she could hear the receding sound of his leather heels cracking upon the sidewalk. When the last sound was gone she sighed and felt cold and lonely and depressed and went back to the sidewalk and took

a bus back downtown to Greenwich Village.

How much better it would have been for everyone, she thought, if one year ago the Ericsons had gone down to Florida instead of to California. How much happier Helene would have been and Michael would have been. How much happier she would have been. And yet? She met the eyes of the plump, comfortable-looking woman in the seat opposite her. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"A nice night? Why, it's a beautiful night, young miss. My son has come home from Korea, and he's alive and all in one piece. Why, this is the most beautiful night of my life."

They chatted about the woman's son all the way down to Washington Square. With the praises of the boy still ringing in her ears, she got off the bus at the end of the line and walked along the pavement under the trees toward Washington Square North. A beginning and a middle and an end, she thought. Michael met and Michael lost, Michael won and the victory not worth the trouble, and Michael sent home where he belonged. Stress and strain there had been, and a momentary abandonment of principles. But thanks to her lucky star, she had come to her senses in the nick of time. The day would come when all concerned would forget what had happened. Helene and Michael, growing old together and happy together, would forget that once upon a time in Palm Springs a wretch of a girl had come along to split them apart. While the wretch of a girl would forget her silliness, would work with her father to create a paying business, would work and—

She halted on the sidewalk before the house, looking

at the Ford sedan standing parked at the curb. Her car? But she had left it in Palm Springs with Aimee. It couldn't be her car, unless . . .

Unless!

She hurried up the stoop and raced along the hall to the living room. Then, seeing Johnny, not Aimee, she came to a halt, her mouth falling agape, her eyes wide and startled.

He grinned crookedly. "What would you do if a fly were to wing its way into your mouth? Close it, there's a good child."

She did. She glanced around for her father.

"He's out," volunteered Johnny Graves. "He was kind enough to insist, however, that I wait here for you. We had quite a battle, but he has finally come to the conclusion that an agreement made by you must be kept by you."

"Not if the agreement is obnoxious to me, which ours is. I see that you didn't receive my long letter."

"I was busy driving your car to New York City."

"It was very considerate of you. I wondered how you and Aimee were going to get it back to me."

"We thought you were wondering."

She walked across the room, and he watched her with pleasure. So she had walked into his life, he remembered, with that same buoyant stride. She had come onto the stage in the rotunda of the Starry Sky Recreation Club, and promptly the show had made sense to him, and life had seemed to him something more than a struggle. "Don't ever grow fat and awkward," he said as she sat down gracefully. "Be your beautiful self always, won't you?"

"That would be impossible, of course. Where's Aimee? Didn't you drive her to New York?"

He sat down. So far, he thought, so good. He had stood up to the meeting, by thunder, the way a man should. But now? He looked down at the tips of his shoes. "She's in Palm Springs, I would imagine. When I left, the place was emptying fast. The Waldmans were still there and a few other people. But the season in general was coming to an end. I don't know why that should be. Yes, it becomes warm there, but a little heat never hurt anyone. And the place is so beautiful. When I marry I shall build my home there."

"And have the Peatties to dinner on occasion?"

He stared, and knew an intense feeling of relief. "Oh, are the Peatties going to be allowed, at last, to live out their own lives in peace?"

Her temper rose. "Don't you dare say such things to me!"

This was better. This was conflict, and conflict was something he could understand and cope with. "You were wrong and you know it. You were a child fighting for a toy you fancied you wanted. And you were a mean child who didn't care how many persons you hurt in the process of getting what you wanted. I didn't like you at all."

She shrugged. She made an effort and controlled her temper. "You're right, of course," she said, astonishing him. "I was a mean little child."

"As a woman," he began shakily, "you're much more likeable."

"Thank you, Mr. Graves."

He gave her a sharp scrutiny. Was he wrong, or were her lips twitching with laughter?

He flushed. "To be perfectly frank, Miss Ericson, as a woman you are lovable."

"Again I thank you, Mr. Graves. I am sure that Aimee will be pleased to hear that you approve of me as I am now."

He sprang from his chair, his green eyes blazing. "None of your games with me! You know very well that Aimee and I are not engaged. How dared you send me such a telegram? I have a good notion to paddle you!"

"I knew." She glanced at the clock and grew aware of fatigue. "But it didn't make much difference to me, really."

All the confidence drained out of him. "It made no difference at all?"

"How could it? Mr. Graves, I don't take love lightly. It is a very serious thing for a woman to repose all her hope of happiness in the hands of a man. Am I a child to take one look at your face and gurgles: 'Oh, I love you, I want to marry you?' No, I am not that sort of person, Mr. Graves."

She rose and stood before him, a beautiful figure with straight back and squared shoulders. The best? He thought of the notions Mr. Borden had on the subject of breeding. The very best? He swallowed. She had sensitivity to the bone. Before him she stood clean-lined and beautiful, a lady if he had ever seen one, in her way a very great and very good lady. She had fought to the hilt for something that had been real to her. It might have been a wrong fight to wage, but how many were

there who could distinguish between right and wrong when emotion was involved, when mind was squeezed out by emotion? She had fought to the hilt as all really worthwhile persons did for the things that were dear to them. But when she had discovered her error, then, by thunder, she'd had the grace to concede that she had been wrong. She had strength, and she had courage. She still had principles, too. He said sharply. "You sent him to Helene?"

"Why not? I am not a woman, Mr. Graves, who needs charity. His place was with Helene, not with me. Under the circumstances I could see nothing else to do with him. Now, if you will forgive me, I'm very tired."

"I will not forgive you. You come back here before I drag you back by the hair."

She turned. "The answer would be no, Johnny. Do you want to hear the answer?"

"Hang it, I love you. Doesn't that make any difference?"

She returned to the living-room and sat down. "In time it might. But, Johnny, it couldn't make much difference now. Johnny, I've been carrying him around in my heart too long. You don't just cut a person out of your heart as easily as that. And I couldn't let your love make a difference until he was gone, don't you see?"

He sat down, too. The truth of the matter was that even this was more than he had expected. In storm the heart had lived, now in peace the heart must renew itself. That was the way of a heart: when it gave it gave in full measure, gave of kindness the way the hearts of the Waldmans did, gave in self-sacrifice the way the

heart of Aimee Reynaud did, gave of loving service the way the heart of Miss Rachel Quinby had, gave of love the way the heart of Wanda Ericson had, until there was nothing more, for the moment, left to give.

"I suppose I do see. But you realize, of course, that I always get what I want."

"I realize that, Johnny."

"And you do realize that I want you?"

"I do, Johnny."

"And that I am going to besiege that hard heart of yours until one day it surrenders."

"Johnny, I will say that I'm very fond of you."

He nodded. Looking into her eyes, he found that they were saying even more, that she was glad that she had met him, that she was glad they had gotten to know one another, that she hoped they would get to know one another better and better. They were saying . . .

He took her into his arms. "Hello, Wanda. My name is John Wilbur Graves, and out on the desert of Arizona I'm going to work wonders. Who and what are you?"

"A girl who wants time, Johnny, in which to make certain that this isn't a mistake. All right?"

He nodded.

Returning to his hotel in a happy daze, he paused at the desk and scribbled a telegram to Abraham Waldman out in Palm Springs, California.

And Abraham Waldman nodded his head, too, with pleasure, after he had read the telegram to Reba. He smiled. "It is a good thing, Reba, to notice everything. I am very glad that one day I noticed an unlocked Ford standing on the escarpment at Palm Canyon. See how

many interesting people I have met because I took the trouble to make that unlocked Ford my business!"

"You didn't want to go down, Abie. You were worried about your corporation and Canasta."

"Reba, you actually believe that?"

She met his brown eyes and smiled pleasantly. "No. Abie, do you think they will ever marry?"

"I do."

"Tell me why, Abie?"

"It's a feeling I have."

"Feelings!"

He chuckled. "Call it belief, then, in my ability to read human natures. I saw an expression in Johnny's eyes one night, and I saw an expression in the eyes of Wanda Ericson. Reba, why do you think I had a char with Michael Peattie? Someone had to precipitate things, as it were. And why not Abraham Waldman? You see, Reba, all people are mine. It was my business. Happiness is the business of everyone, and isn't it true that I'm a part of the world, part of the great design?"

"Such a man is my husband," chuckled Reba. Rising, she went to his chair and gave his ear an affectionate pull. Yes, she decided, one day they would be married, this girl and this man. Abie had said so, and Abie was always right.